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NICK WAS SEIZED BY THE NERVOUS GRIP OF OLD SI, WHO WAS OVERJOYED TO SEE HIM.

Colorado Nick, the Lassoist;

OR,

OLD SI'S PROTEGE.

BY MAJOR HENRY B. STODDARD, EX-SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

THE SIOUX SMOKE LANGUAGE.

THAT portion of Colorado lying about the South Fork of the Republican River, and close to the lines which separate the Centennial State from Nebraska on the north and Kansas on the east, is very broken. North of the old "Dead Man's Trail," which, a quarter of a century ago, was the favorite route to Pike's Peak, are the Rickaree Forks, where many an Indian has gone to the presence of the Great Manitou and where, not three decades ago, a handful of United States troops stood off a dozen times their number of savages for three days, until relief was brought by the scouts sent out to notify the main body of the danger to which the detachment was exposed.

At the place mentioned the "river"—heretofore a mere rivulet struggling through its bed of sand—widens out, forming quite a respectable lake of a mile long and a quarter that in width. The Valley—the bluffs on either side of which are a gun-shot apart—is full of luxuriant herbage, and abundantly frequented by the smaller game of the prairie, while the lake teems with wild fowl, although fish are unknown.

On the western side of the valley the bluff rises abruptly to the height of thirty feet or more and piercing it near the top is a dug-out—a cave dug into the side of the bluff, the ground forming the roof being supported by a few cross-pieces of wood, transported many a mile, and entrance being had by a series of steps hollowed out of the alkali caked soil.

The entrance is barely wide enough to allow a person of moderate weight to squeeze through, and is closed with a door made of half a dozen thicknesses of buffalo-hide which is impervious to either arrow or bullet. The loop-holes to the right of the door as one enters afford light to the inmate and means of defense in case of attack.

Once inside, the appearance of the apartment is quite respectable, as it widens out to the dimensions of a room twelve feet square, primitively, although comfortably, furnished with numerous robes scattered about. A quantity of jerked beef hangs in one corner, while a barrel alongside holds an ample supply of water. There are no signs of fire, and it is well there are not, for there being no chimney, the occupant of the place would be smoked out in a hurry were he to build one.

And here lived Nick Parkhurst; although few of his comrades would recognize him by that title. The sobriquet "Neck-Tie Nick" obtains universally among his associates of the plains, won by his unerring use of the lariat, lasso, or *riata*, as it is indifferently called. With this

snake-like weapon in his hand anything within a circle of forty feet of Nick was as surely his prey as if dead, skinned and hung up in his smoke-house, or scalped and lying at his feet.

The lariat—now so familiar to the cowboy on the plains—that Nick used was fifty feet long, of braided horse-hair, and as strong as an iron chain, while as flexible as silk. The small loop at the end through which the noose traveled, was "parceled," as the sailors say, with a piece of hide, the inner circle of which was worn as smooth as ivory through constant use, while braided in the end that was held in the hand were several long strands of hair, which, no less coarse and no less black than the material composing the lasso, were nevertheless of a far different nature; being a few of the trophies which Nick had snatched from the heads of his red enemies as they lay strangled at his feet.

The black line, encircling the bronze of the dead Sioux was Nick's sign-manual, and as well known to the members of that tribe as if they had seen the whirling cord settle over the victim's head, and heard the dull thud when it tightened and landed the wearer of the "Neck-Tie," as Nick facetiously called it, far on the other shore. He had served his apprenticeship in Texas, and rarely, if ever, missed his mark.

"Fresh meat's gittin' skurse, Barker, and I'm goin' over ter th' Rickaree an' try fur a goose—j'ine me?" said Nick to his partner, old Si Barker, one evening in the year 185—

"Fresh meat be durned!" grimly replied his companion. "Jerky's good 'nough fur me. 'Sides, what yer thinkin' on? Goin' to light a fire, be ye, and bring down ther whole b'ilin' o' Injuns on us? Nick, ye'r a consarned ijit, sometimes, an' ye know we see'd sign this arternoon. I'm with yer in believin' that none o' the tribe knows nuthin' about these yer pre-mize-ez but seems how ef they see smoke, they'll smell a rat. I be in favor o' sort o' lyin' quiet an' bikin' out fur our critters, up stakes, an' gittin' fur quieter quarters. W'ot's the use o' stayin' here eny longer, anyhow? We'd orter left when beaver-in' was done, an' we would 'a', only fur yer cussed par-var-si-tee. Think ye'll git even with the Sioux fer ole times, hey? Nick, ye make my ha'r turn gray!" and grumbling, Barker turned away.

The grayish appearance of the cliffs was so nearly imitated by the mud plastered over the closely-fitting door and loop-hole shutters, that, as Barker said, nothing could be detected twenty paces away; the step also being carelessly cut, and seeming but the effect of rain. The site—if the word can be used in this connection—of the dug-out had been selected with care.

On the Western plains the landmarks being so few and indistinct, whenever the Indian finds water he collects with much trouble a large pile of stones and rears a monument four or five feet high upon the most elevated point in the vicinity. This water-sign, as it is called, can be seen for miles in the clear atmosphere of the prairie, and often points out water which would otherwise be passed by, and water being a very scarce commodity on the plains, is too precious to be missed.

Just over the dug-out stood one of these

monuments and the only descent to the water, marked by a buffalo-trail leading to it, was some distance off, and Nick had displayed much forethought in choosing his location, judging that the Indians would not approach the pile of stones, once having seen it, but would take the trail to the valley. He perceived that, leave what thickness he might, of earth as a ceiling, the earth would naturally sound hollow under the pony's hoofs, and betray something unusual to the ever-suspicious savage.

"Ol' man, ye'r' gittin' wuss and wuss, every day. Soon as we git our furs outen the *cache*, I'm goin' to send yer ter St. Louis ter bo'rdin'-school. Tar! tar!" and Nick walked off toward the lake, where thousands of water-fowl were splashing and quacking in the evening sun.

The grass, as he approached the stream, was near breast high, and he had no difficulty in getting within easy range. He was armed with his rifle, and the knocking the head off of a duck or goose was child's play; yet he hesitated. He knew that Old Si, so well versed in Indian warfare, was not in the habit of causing false fears, and that without sufficient ground, he would not object to Nick's proposition. Still he hated to give in, and selecting his game was about to fire, when a dark something far off to his right, perceived yet hardly seen, caught his eye.

Down into the protecting grass he cowered like a flash and turned his gaze in the direction of the mystery. Far to the southeast hung a film in the air, which looked like smoke yet which could hardly be. Such could only be produced by fire which kindled was instantly smothered. But it was only too clear to Nick, what it meant. He recognized the Sioux signal, and, knowing as he did that he and Si were alone in that country, felt that their lives were interested in the smoke conversation now being held.

The Sioux Indians, when they wish to communicate with any others of their tribe who may be in the vicinity, collect a quantity of dry grass, buffalo-chips, or anything that will burn. Setting fire to this collection they wait until it commences to blaze freely when they smother it by holding a buffalo-robe tightly down over the flame. The result is the collection of a quantity of dense smoke under the hide which by lifting one corner is released. The length of time between these releasings of smoke as well as the amount allowed to escape form a language which can be read for miles, and which is easily understood by the versed observer.

"Ol' Si war right," muttered Nick, between his clinched teeth, and looking anxiously around, he awaited the answering signal.

CHAPTER II.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE DUG-OUT.

HE was not kept long in suspense.

In the distance, where he had first perceived the smoke, clouds of the vapor kept arising at irregular intervals and of different density.

"Lookin' fur water, an' got scouts out, hey?"

continued Nick, keeping up a running conversation with himself as do most men of solitary habits. "Hope they won't light upon this yere place. JERUSALEM!"

This emphatic exclamation was called forth by the appearance, right alongside the water-sign on the bluff before referred to, of a mounted warrior, in full paint and slight costume, who sat as a statue, looking toward the south. He was soon apparently satisfied that the signals were as he interpreted them, so dismounting from his horse, he proceeded to gather a quantity of grass and to place it at the side of the stone pyramid, where it would be sheltered from the wind.

The mass of inflammable matter was quickly ignited, and as soon as it burned freely, was covered with the piece of buffalo-hide which served as a saddle for the scout. One, two, three puffs of smoke were allowed to escape, and interpreted by the scout to mean, "Water here."

Nick's finger was on the trigger of his rifle, and his eye glanced along the brown barrel more than once, yet he hesitated to fire, fearing the presence of other Indians in the vicinity, and that they might be attracted by the report. So he waited. He judged that the warrior would soon descend to obtain water for his horse and himself, and therefore crept carefully through the grass until he reached a point within a few feet of the trail which led to the water from the bluff. Here he waited.

The Indian, after carefully stamping out the fire that still smoldered, turned to his pony, which grazed near by, mounted, and rode slowly to the buffalo-trail, which wound its sinuous track down the side of the bluff, and began to descend.

Nick, completely hidden by the tall grass, quietly laid his rifle down, untied the buckskin thong which attached his lariat to his belt on his left side; prepared his noose which he held in his right hand; grasped the end of the rope in his left hand, holding it with his little and third fingers, and allowing the coils to hang over his middle and index fingers, keeping them in place with his thumb, and crouched for his prey.

Down the bluff came the Indian, casting his glances hither and thither, but suspecting no danger. He rode slowly by Nick, on down to the water. Scarce had he passed the spot where Neck-Tie was concealed, when the latter arose. Circling over his head the snake-like *riata* hissed quietly through the air, and then darted out in the direction of the mounted warrior.

Settling over his head onto his shoulders, a jerk at exactly the right time, tightened the noose around his neck, while a second vigorous pull choked in its beginning the yell that was rising in his throat, and dragged him violently to the ground.

A leap and a bound and Nick was alongside him. Placing one foot on the breast of the dismounted warrior, he strained heavily on the rope. The eyes of the Indian fairly leaped from their sockets, a bloody froth issued from his mouth, he settled back, and Nick's thug-like Neck-Tie had again done its work, and another savage had gone to the Happy Hunting-Grounds.

Nick loosened the noose, removed the rope, coiled it nicely up, attached it by its thong to his belt and then scalped his victim in a manner that showed thorough familiarity with his work.

"I allers takes off the rope before I skelps 'em," said Nick. "It don't bloody the *riata*, and saves mussin' up the consarn. Now, ye painted devil, I'll jest put yer carcass inter the long grass, fur fear o' diskivery, take yer pony away a little, an' then hike out fur camp. Time I wuz warnin' Si 'bout this yere rumpus. Kinder seems like we 'u'd hev ter hunt our hole till them red-skins leaves these parts. They'll never find out the dug-out."

Ned stooped to take up the corpse, when "ping" came an arrow, passing between Neck-Tie's right arm and his body, and burying itself deep in the breast of the dead Indian. Nick turned, grasping his rifle as he did so.

At full gallop, riding away, having seen that his shot had failed, was an Indian who had crept down on Nick, and nearly ended his life and this story. He crouched low on his horse, and, his blanket—stolen from some massacred emigrant—floating in the wind, his magnificent head-dress of war eagle-feathers flying out in disorder, urged his steed to its highest speed. No use.

Scarce a second elapsed from the time that Nick caught sight of the chief till the crack of the rifle came. The barrel dropped into his hand, his eye "slid" along its surface, his finger touched the trigger, and in response to the report came a yell from the savage as, shot through the body, he fell from his horse, which swept away to join the first wild herd it could find.

"I'll hev your skelp, ef I goes under fer it, measly skunk that yer be fer tryin' to shute me in ther back," growled Nick, regardless of the fact that the country seemed to be teeming with Indians, and off he started. He reached his quarry, ran his knife around the scalp-lock and with a sudden jerk laid the skull bare.

"'Bout time ter hunt the ranch. Two skelps 's better'n a wild goose any day," congratulated Nick, and started toward the bluff.

"How is it that Nick has never been killed?" was asked over and over, and over again, from one end of the plains to the other. He was the most venturesome of all the trappers. Careless, taking no precautions against surprise and escaping dangers in some unexpected manner in a way that seemed almost miraculous. And so it was now. He walked along without even looking back whistling and adding up the number of scalps that he had taken during the last six months.

Gliding along like some large, copper-colored snake, an Indian, with hate gleaming in his eyes, with his tomahawk in his hand, kept approaching closer and closer. Getting within almost arm's reach he raised his hand, straining every muscle, thew and sinew to its highest tension, that the steel might sink deep through skull and brain, and crush out the life of his hated yet feared foe.

Another step forward until Nick cleared the tall grass and stepped out into full view of the dug-out. Another step forward, and the tomahawk gleaming high in the air was about to

cleave downward, when there was a dull thud, the Indian sunk to earth, and as the report of a rifle rung on the air, a little cloud of smoke rolled up lazily from one of the loop-holes of the dug-out, and was quickly blown away. Old Si Barker had saved his partner's life for not the first nor the twentieth time.

Imperturbable and cool as ever, Nick turned, and before the death-gurgle had fairly died out of the red-man's throat, had snatched his scalp-lock from his head. As he rose from his stooping position he glanced across to the opposite bluff. A yell arose from that direction as he did so, and the war-band of Indians rode into sight, saw their companion lying on the ground, and lashing their horses, started for the entrance to the valley, leaving a few of their number to watch Nick.

He had but a moment for reflection.

"Ef I go ter the dug-out the red-skins 'll dis-kiver the sekrit. Ef I stay yere, I'll be massacred. W'ot in thunder'll I do?"

The question was quickly solved, for Old Si, throwing open the door, stood on the ledge, and called out:

"Come up here, ye thunderin' ijut; do yer want ter be skelped and me starved out? We'll beat 'em yet. Hike, ye fool, and durned quick!"

It was "a ground-hog case," and Nick had to go. He was barely in time, for as he climbed into the door the troop of savages thundered into the valley and gave an exultant yell, as they saw their supposed victim disappear into what they were positive must be his death-trap, as well as that of his companion.

They did not know their men!

CHAPTER III.

CORRALED IN A DUG-OUT.

WARNED by the fate of their comrade, the Sioux halted some distance above the dug-out and out of range. By a series of holes pierced through the earth for some distance, and running to points ten or twelve feet in the bank on either side of the fort—for such it might well be called—the whole valley was laid visible to Nick and his companion, so that the savages were in full view.

"W'ot be the varmint a-doin', Nick?" queried Old Si, as he puffed away at his pipe as unconcerned as if there was not an Indian within a thousand miles. "Holdin' a korkus an' decidin' how to perceed to adjourn this yere meetin'? I'm a-thinkin' that thar'll be a mi-nor-i-tee report from this yere side o' the house 'fore the meetin' adjourns!" and the old man chuckled at his joke.

Nick, in the mean time, was engaged in a mysterious examination of a plaited cord, carefully rolled up in a coil and hung on a stout forked stick, being also tied firmly in its place. It was about the size of his little finger, and made of strands of green rawhide.

As Si spoke Nick went to one of the loop-holes, which was covered with a quadruple thickness of hide, swinging from the top. The hide had

been taken when green, soaked in water to make it more pliable, sewed in four thicknesses and then dried in the sun. It was as hard as iron. The same course had been pursued in making the door. At the lower edge of each of the hanging shutters, which covered the loop-holes, a notch in the shape of an inverted V had been cut about half an inch in length. This was to enable the marksman to see the sights of his rifle, for as he rested the weapon on the sill and pushed the muzzle through the loop-hole, the piece of hide swung out, allowing the gun to pass, and making the notch cut a hind sight.

Looking through the loop-holes over to the opposite bluff, Nick saw that it was deserted. Knowing the position of their enemies, the lookouts stationed opposite had evidently thought it useless to mount guard longer and had joined their comrades in the valley. Going to the holes which commanded the valley in a northerly direction, the trapper soon got the Indians in range and saw that they were discussing the best means of attack.

The sun had already set and twilight was fast disappearing. Nick knew his enemies well enough to be fully persuaded that they would not long delay the expected advance. He was also satisfied that one or more of his foes was lurking in the grass in front of the dug-out; so, calling Old Si, he determined to give him or them a surprise.

It was scarcely fifty yards from the bluff to where the tall grass commenced, and to reach this grass Nick now determined. His first move was to divest himself of every particle of clothing which bore any striking color, and when through with his toilet, he stood clothed in a complete suit of dust-colored buckskin, which was almost the identical hue of the dirt of the walls around him.

Old Si, with many grumblings and growlings, vainly endeavored to dissuade him from his "durned foolish mas-quee-ra-din'." (Whenever the old man struck a long word—the use of which he was very fond of—he pronounced it very slowly and distinctly).

Slowly and carefully pushing the swinging-door—also hung from above—outward, Neck-tie Nick slid silently down the face of the bluff, leaving Si at one of the loop-holes, rifle in hand. It was now so nearly dark that it was impossible for any one to distinguish the young ranger as he crawled along the bank, for his entire body was of a color so similar to that of the bluff that it made no visible outline.

Nick's mission was not altogether a foolhardy one. He intended to gather what he thought might be valuable information, and at the same time take in a scalp or so if opportunity should offer.

Skirting the bluff for a few hundred yards, he was suddenly brought to a dead stop by the sound of horses' hoofs. Just in front of where he lay, stretched at full length under an overhanging ledge, the bluff bent a little in the northwesterly direction, hiding the valley from him, although not from the dug-out. Around this bend came the Indians in single file, and passing him by but a few feet, halted.

"Ef Old Si could see me now," thought Nick,

"he'd think this was my last mask'raid, sure 'nuff."

There evidently was discord among the Indians. One, who seemed highest in authority, urged the leaving of the horses where they were, and that the band should stealthily advance and attack the dug-out, while others wished to await the day.

It was at length decided to leave one of the youngest and most inexperienced braves in charge of the horses, while the rest should draw a cordon or line of sentries around in front of the dug-out, so that no one could escape.

And so it was done, Nick chuckling inwardly and congratulating himself that he had gotten out of what looked like a nasty scrape so easily.

The Indians had proceeded noiselessly down the valley to take up their posts and wait for daylight, that they might investigate this mysterious retreat of their enemies, leaving the ponies in charge of a young warrior, much against his will.

Like shadows the savages faded away into the night, while the weary ponies, straying a little from the bluff, began to crop the succulent buffalo-grass, which was so grateful after the long day's march. The solitary guard, grumbling at being left behind, strolled up and down, increasing the length of his beat until he was absent from Nick's lair nearly a minute at a time.

Of this opportunity Neck-Tie was quick to avail himself. Wrapped around his body was his trusty lariat, without which he never stirred, and as the sentinel strode past, Nick quickly arose and unwrapped a half-dozen of the coils. Forming the loop he backed against the bluff and waited.

Back soon came the young warrior, his anger toned down by the time that had elapsed since his comrades had departed, while his thoughts had probably reverted to some dark-skinned maiden who awaited his return with his first scalp to welcome him and called him "Brave!"

If it was so it was his last dream on earth. The faint gleam of the stars was light enough for Nick's practiced eye. His wrist twirled high over his head, the noose circled, launched itself and fell on the young Indian's shoulders, while at one and the same moment, with a leap like the wild-cat, Nick flew at his prey and placing his knee between the copper-colored shoulders threw all his weight back on the rope. A gasp—a gurgle, and another scalp hung dangling at Nick's belt, while a drop of blood glistened on his knee where it had fallen.

"Young feller, it's durned hard, but war's war, an' all must take their chances," philosophically remarked Nick, as he began to think of getting back to camp. Surrounded as it was by the twenty-five or thirty savages that composed the band, it would be foolhardy to attempt to pass through the lines and scale the bluff undiscovered, so Nick decided to go on a small reconnoitering expedition before braving the unknown dangers to which he was exposed.

Taking a northerly direction from the dug-out, he proceeded some little distance until he came to the trail leading to the top of the bluff which he took boldly, not fearing that there were any

Indians there. Once on the plain above he cautiously moved away from the edge of the bluff, bending low so that his figure might not be seen against the sky by his enemies in the valley below. Turning again to the south he walked until opposite the water-sign which he approached with the same caution he had displayed in leaving the edge of the bank.

Arrived at the edge of the bluff he dropped flat and cautiously peered over. Nothing whatever could be seen and the valley lay quiet and dark. Filmy clouds overspread the sky and whatever light the stars had given was obscured now. Leaning as far over the edge as he dared, Nick, taking one end of his lasso in his hand, swung it out and in until it struck the buffalo-hide door below, hoping that the tapping would attract Old Si. And this it soon did, for a whisper was heard:

"Be that you, Nick?"

"It be. I'm going to try an' swing inter ther ol' ranch, an' you ketch an' yank me in as I cum down. Hear?"

"Swing away; I'll ketch yer."

The pile of stones marking the vicinity of water was very near the edge of the bluff, and, having been exposed to the storms of years, was as solid as one piece of stone. Placing his lasso around the base of the monument, and pulling the two ends until they were even, Nick found that he had a rope about twenty-five feet long, which was amply sufficient to lower him the distance he had to descend, and for him it was the simplest matter imaginable to swing himself over, and, keeping a tight grip on the two strands, let himself down slowly. The only fear was that the lariat might break, but Nick did not fear his Neck-Tie, and in a moment more he was seized by the nervous grip of Old Si, who was so overjoyed to see him, that he scarce refrained from embracing him.

"Durned ef I didn't think 'twar Katie-Barthe-Door, this time, Nick. I see'd the sneakin' Injuns flin' down, an' could 'a' dropped one or two, but didn't know whar you war. So yer got another skulp? Well, bu'st my buttons, ef yer ain't a t'arer! But, hyar we air corraled, an' how we air gwine to git out, bu'st me ef I know! But sit down, pard, an' b'ist in a little jerky, an' I'll look out fur the varmint, tho' bu'st me ef they kin git inter this hyar hole."

CHAPTER IV.

BAITING THE TRAP.

As soon as Nick had satisfied his hunger and thirst, he and Old Si began to cogitate regarding their present penned-up condition. They knew that they had no expectation of aid from the outside, for the party to which they belonged had long since left that section of the country for the forts, intending to dispose of the furs they had trapped during the winter.

They had endeavored to persuade Nick and Old Si to accompany them, but their efforts in that direction had met with no success. As spring came on and the young grass commenced to shoot, Nick knew that the buffalo would travel south,

and he wished to replenish the store of dried meat that he always kept in his dug-out and which had been attacked so often by the hungry trappers during the winter, that sad inroads had been made upon it.

Besides this the young trapper was an inveterate Indian-hater, and with good reason. Raised on the borders of the Llanos, or Staked Plains, he had seen, during one wild night's work, his father and his mother shot down by the Sioux on one of their southern excursions, the home that had sheltered him so many years a prey to the flames, and his infant sister carried off, shrieking, in the arms of a chief. How he had escaped he hardly knew. The friendly darkness had aided him, and a thorough knowledge of the country enabled him to reach the nearest fort and give the alarm.

But a few days elapsed until his sister was restored to him, the troops having overtaken the savages, and dealt them a salutary lesson. The child was adopted by the wife of one of the officers, while Nick became the *protege* of Old Si, who had reared him as his son, and taught him all the mysteries of a trapper's life. They were firm friends, and knew it, and spent no time in idle protestations.

As Nick grew up he passed his teacher, and became more an adept than Si. He was quicker, thought more rapidly, and could plan and execute with a rapidity which dazed his mentor, who, however, felt no jealousy, but rather prided himself upon having such a ready pupil.

Nick had left his lariat hanging over the pile of stones as he swung into the door, knowing that he could at any moment, by pulling on one end, allow it to slip around the place which held it and fall over the bluff. Glancing at the ends which were attached to a peg alongside the entrance, an idea seemed to strike him, which he immediately communicated to Old Si. The latter opposed him strenuously, as, in fact, he usually did; but the dispute ended as their discussions generally terminated, by Nick carrying his point, and overruling his companion.

So, untying the rope from the pin which held it, he said a few words to his companion, and prepared to swing out of the door and climb to the bluff above. This, for such an athlete as Nick, was proved but child's play to him, and he soon was some distance from the edge of the bank, and retracing his steps toward the trail by which he had reached the plain from the valley.

What plan did he have in thus returning into the danger from which he had so recently escaped? The conversation with Si had proven that it was a hazardous undertaking that called him from the dug-out this second time; but Ned cared for nothing that did not contain a spice of danger.

Cautiously creeping into the valley and carefully approaching the spot where his late victim lay, a few moments' listening convinced him that nothing had been discovered, and that the rest of the Indians were still holding their silent and sleepless watch. The body of the youth lay quiet in death, and to lift it upon his shoulder was but a light task for Nick, the dead brave being a mere stripling, the son of the chief in command of the war-party, as Nick learned

through the few words he had caught while they were forming their plans.

Barely staggering under the weight he bore, Nick turned to the north and struck boldly along the trail. Knowing, as he did, that the Indians had concentrated their forces around and in front of the dug-out, he feared to encounter no foe in the direction he was pursuing. A few moments' fast walking brought him to the end of the lake and to a point where the stream which emptied it was but a few yards across.

Wading through this rivulet, Nick again turned south and, carefully this time, brushed through the tall grass until he arrived at a point opposite the dug-out, and on the other side of the body of water which lay in front of it. Here he stopped and laid the corpse on the ground while he began looking here and there, guiding himself by the piles of stones on the bluff, which were just discernible. At length he found what he was in search of, and which proved to be one of those depressions in the earth, so many of which are seen on the plains, known as a buffalo-wallow. These have been described so often that a repetition would be useless.

Ned carefully examined this wallow, and identified it by a piece of stone half-buried in it, nearly in the center, and then returning to the place where he had first halted, shouldered the dead boy again, carried him to the wallow and "chucked" him down.

"Lie thar, ye skunk. Ye'll make a good bait to trap the rest o' the gang, an' that's more use than yer ever war a-livin'. An' now I'll git back ter camp an' snooze fur awhile, fer I'm dead played out."

It was no difficult matter for him to regain the plain and to lower himself over the bluff, and, after drawing his rope down after him, he closed the door carefully, and requesting Si to keep watch for a time, although such precaution seemed useless, so safe were they from attack, the young hunter threw himself on a robe in the corner and immediately fell fast asleep.

It is now time to explain the mystery of his last movements. When the comrades of Nick and Si had left them, they had taken the wagon which had carried the stores for the winter's camp, having loaded it with furs. Everything that might be of use to the two trappers who remained behind had been left, among such articles being a half-barrel of gunpowder. Not caring to place so dangerous an object in the dug-out, for fear of accident, Nick determined to bury it, after removing sufficient of the contents to provide for the present use, and looking for a suitable locality hit upon a buffalo-wallow opposite the camp.

He knew that if he buried it here, the spot could be easily found when necessary, and also that the grass in the bottom would grow rapidly and conceal all evidence that the ground had been disturbed. The barrel was made of oak and completely water tight, yet he took the additional precaution of giving it a coating of tar, of which they had a store, and of wrapping it in several old buffalo-hides. Then it was buried about three feet deep.

One of Nick's principal maxims was: "In

time of peace, prepare for war," and it was owing to the fact that he so continually practiced this maxim that he was so successful a trapper and scout. He was rarely taken unawares, and seemed, in some mysterious manner, ever to be prepared for the greatest emergencies.

Following his usual plan, then, of anticipating anything that might occur, before burying the powder he had prepared a surprise for any of his enemies who might chance to come in his way. Taking an old single-barreled pistol which he had, he loaded it with powder alone, and removing the bung from the end of the barrel of powder, had inserted in its place the pistol-barrel. A line of rawhide was then laid in a narrow trench of the bluff, and then over a pulley up into the dug-out one end of it being attached to the trigger of the pistol. The latter was then cocked, a box carefully placed over it, the earth thrown in, the sod replaced and sprinkled, and in a few days no signs could be seen that the earth had been disturbed.

Nick trusted to his good fortune, to chance, or to some ingenious device to collect any attacking party of savages in the vicinity, and that a strong pull on the cord would explode the pistol, ignite the powder and cause a stampede if nothing worse.

Nick slept on; the old scout dozed, arousing himself occasionally to glance from one of the loop-holes or to listen, but nothing seemed stirring—all was as quiet as the grave. The sky became clear again, the stars shone out and the valley was to some extent visible. Soon the horizon began to brighten, the glitter of the stars faded away and the rays of the morning sun shot up into the sky, heralding his coming.

Old Si kept continual watch, his vigil at length being rewarded by the sight of one of the look-outs on the opposite bluff, who, leaning far over the edge of the bank, seemed to be straining his eyes toward something that lay prone on the ground not far from where he stood. At length he seemed satisfied that all was not right, for calling his comrade, they talked and gesticulated rapidly for a few moments and then turned and rode rapidly toward the descent into the valley.

Having reached the ponies, which were feeding along the banks of the stream, many of them being hobbled, they evidently became more distrustful and after searching a few moments gave a loud "whoop."

In response to this there was a general rustling in the tall grass opposite the dug-out, and Old Si, handling his rifle nervously, evidently ached to try a chance shot. From any such action he was, however, deterred by Nick, who had arisen by this time, and who angrily expostulated with him.

"Yer'll sp'ile the hull scheme, Si," angrily exclaimed Nick. "Yer see that ther Injuns bez got excited an' ef yer git ter shutin' at 'em yer'll change the'r ideers. Injuns kin only hev one ideer at er time, so jes' let 'em hatch out this yer' one an' we'll see sum fun."

In obedience to Nick's wishes, or rather commands, Si reluctantly dropped his rifle and stood watching through one of the lookout holes to

see what might transpire. The Indians had evidently been warned that something unexpected had occurred, for soon, some distance up the valley, the whole band was seen to gather, and after a short consultation, scatter in all directions, evidently in obedience to a command from the chief.

The two warriors who had been posted on the bluff opposite the dug-out left their horses with the rest of the herd, and, keeping well under the shelter of the opposite bank, began slowly to walk in the direction of the object which had attracted their attention when daylight first showed it to them.

CHAPTER V.

A REPORT FROM THE MINE.

So it seemed as if Ned's bait were going to draw the prey into the trap. In the corner of the dug-out hung the innocent-looking piece of rawhide cord, a pull at which would, if Ned's arrangements had been well made, ignite the powder—fifty pounds or more—in the barrel buried under the ground where lay the body of the young warrior, and hurl everything and every person in its vicinity to destruction. Cautiously, as if fearing a foe in every blade of grass that trembled in the morning wind, every leaf that fluttered in the breeze, the two warriors approached the spot, while the two men in the dug-out made no sign.

The wallow was in easy range, yet the trappers wanted a larger haul. As the Indians approached the dead savage warily, their lives were in the hands of those who watched them, yet they were unharmed. They knew that the bank had opened and closed mysteriously upon the white men, and influenced by that superstition that is so deeply implanted in the breast of all Indians, they were awed and troubled.

Still more so by the mystery surrounding the object toward which they were bending their steps. Lying in the center of the buffalo wallow, the body was partially hidden from the depression in which it lay, and although they suspected that it was a dead comrade, yet they could not assure themselves of the fact, and of the identity of the body they were entirely unaware.

Made bolder by the dead silence which surrounded them, they quickened their steps, arrived at the body, and, turning it over on its back, recognized the son of their chief, with the fatal mark encircling its neck. A wild yell was quickly answered from different directions, and forgetful of all danger, the whole red band came trooping to the call, followed at a little distance by their chief.

And then ensued a scene of mingled rage and terror impossible to depict—rage against the slayer of their comrade—terror at the mysterious manner of his death. Many of the band recognized the mark of the strangling noose around the dead boy's neck, for on many a field, when the fight was over, they had seen it. But now their superstition was aroused.

The sudden disappearance of Nick into the very side of the bluff, which seemed free from

all openings; the unaccountable taking off of the boy brave when the face of the bank where the trapper was supposed to be hidden was watched and guarded by the entire band—all this was beyond their power to understand, and their terror was augmented by the inexplicable problem which confronted them.

The whole war-party was moved by one common impulse—that of a desire for revenge, and a wish to seek a solution of the mystery they had encountered. A savage yell and a brandishing aloft of their weapons testified to their anger. Then there was silence as the aged chief stepped forward and took up his station by the side of the body of his dead son, the warriors pressing closely about him to catch what he might have to say.

In the dug-out, Nick's blood was aflame. In that low, hoarse tone which a man's voice assumes in times of great excitement, he addressed Old Si, grasping him by the arm and dragging him to one of the loop-holes, while he took up his station at the other.

"See!" he hissed, "it is Deer Trail, the slayer of the old man and my mother."

Unconsciously he drifted into the use of better language as his thoughts reverted to his boyhood days, and to the tender care that had nurtured him.

"At last I've got the tiger in reach. Si, take hol' o' th' string, an' as my rifle cracks, pull, dern ye, pull as if yer whole life depended on't. I'll put a bullet in ther vamint's hide, an' send him ter kingdom cum; but don't yer pull till yer hear's ther rifle speak. I must wait my chance."

In obedience to Nick's order Si placed himself in readiness, taking the end of the rawhide cord in his hand, gathering up the slack carefully and awaiting the signal.

And so were placed the mortal enemies. Gathered in a crowd was the band of Indians, twenty-six in number, closing around the old chief in a circle, waiting to hear what he might have to say, and ready to carry out what plans he might have, of vengeance. At their feet lay the body of the youth who was to have succeeded his father, while under their feet lay death and destruction, to be exploded, when a nervous twitch from the hand of Old Si should release it from its confinement.

In the dug-out were Nick and his partner—the young man with his rifle resting in the loop-hole, his eye glancing along the barrel, his brows set in a savage frown and his whole frame strung with a tense impatience as he awaited the parting of the crowd of Indians that he might catch sight of the chief he held in such deadly hatred; in the corner was Old Si, stern as fate, cool and calm and unmoved as if he held a kite-string instead of the lives of twenty men. With the cord in his hand he stood braced ready to pull and apparently indifferent whether the signal came in a second or in an hour. He was an' would be ready at any moment.

Lifting his hand aloft the aged chief commanded silence and impressively pointed to the corpse at his feet.

"My children," he began, his voice, stolid as he was, trembling somewhat despite his efforts to the contrary, "many suns have we hunted

together—many moons watched by the camp-fire. We shared the same dangers—enjoyed the same repose. There was confidence in our ranks and we believed in each other.

"The bonds of our friendship were strong and I had hoped to bequeath them to my son who, I thought, would succeed me in your hearts.

"That hope is gone. My enemy—your enemy who is there"—with a sweep of his hand indicating the western bluff, and taking a step in that direction, while the circle of Indians opened and fell back—"has killed my son, and in him has killed me—"

It was his last word on earth.

A stream of blood spurted from his breast, he made a half-turn to the left, staggered and fell dead across the body of his son, while for a second the rest of the band gazed awe-struck at each other, and, as the report of Nick's rifle rung on the deathlike stillness of the valley, turned to seek safety in flight, but it was too late.

The ground under their feet trembled, yawned, cracked in a thousand places, and through these many mouths the earth vomited such a volume of smoke, fire and death that the surface for yards around was sent hurtling into the air, carrying with it the entire band of warriors.

Si had pulled the cord, the explosion had followed and the Indians were blown into eternity. The concussion was tremendous, and when the smoke cleared away the sight presented was a terrible one.

Far and wide the valley in the vicinity of the wallow was covered with human remains—legs, arms, trunks and heads being strewn in every direction. The yawning chasm left in the earth where the barrel of gunpowder had been stored gave evidence of the terrific force of the explosion, while not an Indian was left alive to tell the tale. So closely huddled together had they been that the explosion had affected them as one man and the slaughter had been complete.

"Wal, lad, ye'r' about even, be'n't yer?" said Old Si to Nick, as the latter stood gazing out of the loop-hole, seemingly horror-stricken by what he had seen.

"Even! Oh, yes, Si, more than ever," returned Nick in that strange new language which seemed unfamiliar, yet was familiar to him. "The old folks are avenged an' I kin git back ter camp an' giv' up huntin' red-skins. Seems as tho' th' ol' hankerin' fur skelps is gone sence ther bizness blowed up, an' I'm sort o' sick o' th' hull outfit."

Nick had mixed much with the officers and their wives at the fort, and his language of the plains was more than half assumed. Besides, his sister had an ennobling effect on him, and often begged him to give up his wild life and return to civilization.

"Gittin' squeemish be yer? Tell yer, Nick, yer mus' brace up, fer this yer'll never do. This las' bit o' strat-e-gee war a grand piece o' bizness and I'm proud o' ye; but yer don't want ter let up now. Less go down an' see ef ther hull b'ilin' o' Injuns went under, sure 'nuff."

Fearlessly the two trappers descended the side of the bluff and rapidly walked up to where

the lake narrowed into the creek, and here they crossed, glancing with a look of satisfaction at the herd of ponies which grazed near by, kept from escaping by hopples which bound their fore-feet together.

"Thet's a purty good haul ter make," said Old Si, at thought of the price the animals would bring. "We'll start fer the fort this arternoon, Nick, an' take the critters with us."

They soon arrived at the scene of the explosion, and here the havoc wrought was even more perceptible than from the dug-out. The ground was torn and rent in every direction; headless, armless, and legless bodies strewed the turf far and wide, while a sickening stench of burnt flesh burdened the air and made the mere act of breathing a difficult one.

Lying in the bottom of the hole, having been blown straight up into the air and having fallen back again, lay the body of the chief. His arms and legs were twisted and blackened, while his head was in no apparent manner injured.

Nick stood and gazed at the red-skin who had wrought such ruin in his home. A look of cruel satisfaction overspread his features, and with a gleam of savage joy he leaped into the trench hollowed out by the explosion, snatched his knife from his belt, made a circular sweep around the top of the skull, and wrenching the scalp-lock off, held it high above his head, shaking it at Si and laughing a fiendish laugh, which it scarcely seemed possible could proceed from the lips of the person who had stood looking out of the loop-hole in the dug-out a few moments before. The man had given way to the brute.

Old Si was soon off on a scalp-hunting expedition of his own, but met with scant success, as the fire from the powder had so singed and scorched and seared everything that but few locks were left. Fatalism alone had served to throw the scalp of the chief into Nick's hands.

He, too, anxiously searched among the debris for the young chief. Every trophy from that hated race was of inestimable value to him, and he bent eagerly over the ground in his search for his prey.

A blood-curdling yell startled them to their feet, and looking off to the left they saw a band of savages on the edge of the bluff exactly over the dug-out!

CHAPTER VI.

VAMOSING THE RANCH.

THEY were evidently a portion of the tribe that had attacked the dug-out and had either straggled off from the main body or had been scouting in a different direction.

With the sound of the war-whoop, Old Si had sunk into the grass, while Nick, with a backward spring, landed in the hole made by the explosion, where he lay, peering over the edge and watching the movements of the enemy. Old Si wound his way into the tall grass and there stopped.

Nick saw him sink on one knee; saw his rifle raised, the flame and smoke leap from the muzzle, heard the sharp crack and simultaneously saw the foremost Indian of the troop throw up

his arms and fall backward to the ground while his companions hastily turned and fled to a safe distance, followed by a bullet from Nick's rifle, which sung harmlessly over them.

As soon as the Indians disappeared Si came stalking back to where Nick was fortified and stepped down into the hole, behind him. A short consultation decided that they should await events where they were until dark, at least, as it would be dangerous to attempt to reach the dug-out now. The trail lay close along the bluff and an Indian arrow might stop them in a peculiarly unpleasant way before they could find shelter.

Si had a little jerked meat stowed away in one of his capacious pockets and this they leisurely chewed while interchanging their views regarding their situation. One guarding, the other crawled to the lake and refreshed himself with a deep draught of water, after which they felt well enough to "whip a ton o' Injuns," as Old Si quaintly put it.

Each man then produced his pipe—the hunter's solace—and lying on their backs with the sun shining broad in their faces, they smoked as serenely as if inside the walls of the strongest fort on the plains. Protected as they were by the walls of their artificial embankment they were in no real danger, although how they would escape from the trap into which they had fallen would be difficult to say.

Lying on the sloping sides of the hollow, one facing east, the other west, they commanded a view of the entire crest of the bluffs on both sides of the valley, and nothing could descend therein without being perceived by one or the other.

Nick was so situated that the water-mark was directly in his line of vision, and upon that he kept a sharp lookout. He knew that the Indian shot by Old Si must have fallen right alongside it, and suspected that the others had not ridden far off, and that one or more of them would soon return on a reconnoitering expedition. Nor was he wrong.

But a short time had elapsed when he saw, peeping around one side of the pile of stones, the painted head of a savage. So little of his face was exposed that no fair mark was offered, and Nick withheld his fire, and throwing his pipe aside, he motioned to his companion to do the same, lest the smoke might betray their whereabouts to the keen-eyed warrior.

The latter evidently thought that they were in the tall grass, and which he could not see without approaching closer to the edge of the bluff, so throwing himself flat on his stomach, he began to crawl slowly and cautiously toward the brink. At length the top of his head appeared in the short grass which grew on the plain above, and he eagerly surveyed the valley below. Not a sign of human life was visible to him, and he leaned over the bluff still further, looking up and down the valley.

This carelessness was his death-warrant.

As he leaned far over, Nick, resting his rifle on the edge of the bank which had been thrown up, took a long and careful aim, fired, and sent his bullet through and through the skull of the incautious savage. He sprung up convulsively, turned as though dazed, leaped high in the air,

and fell head-foremost into the valley beneath, where his body crushed against the ground with a sickening thud.

"Sorter reckon them Sioux'll be a leetle more keeful hereafter," chuckled Old Si, as he watched the effect of the shot. "Ef they want ter display eny more ac-ro-bat-is-tic performances, we kin help 'em out. But, Nick, this yer' place is a-gittin' mi'ty hot. S'posin' we up stakes an' git. We'll take them thar critters we've captured, an' ridin' a couple, drive the rest inter ther fort. We kin sell 'em fer right smart o' money, I'm thinkin', an' we kin do nothin' hyar. We'll stop at t'uther ranch, an' git our critters and hike out. We kin leave ther dug-out ter take care o' itself. What does yer say?"

"I'm with yer, Si. Seein's how we got ther critters, it 'pears to be ther best thing we kin do. We'll take to ther grass an' work our way down to ther ponies, drive 'em close under the bluff on the west side thar, an' ther Injuns can't see us. Ef yer'll come down ter ther trail, I'll clime up an' see whar ther Injuns air. One or two more shots'll skeer 'em clean outen ther country."

Carefully looking along the line of bluff to discover any lurking enemy, the hunters, finding the coast apparently clear, quickly left the shelter of the trench and gained the tall grass, which hid them completely from view, as they bent over and went at a quick trot in the direction where the ponies continued to graze.

Arrived in their vicinity, in obedience to Nick's request, Old Si took up his position in the grass opposite the trail, while Nick quickly crossed the run, reached the bluff and began to ascend the path leading to the plain, down which the Indian had ridden the evening before.

Nearing the top he slackened his steps, and, bending nearly double, ascended very slowly. When almost at the summit he fell flat, and drew himself along carefully by his hands. His head reached the level of the plain; he raised on his elbows until his eyes were above the grass, and there, not three feet from his nose, was the painted and scowling face of an Indian.

The scowl on the countenance of the latter quickly changed to the most supreme astonishment as he encountered Nick's gaze. The latter, always armed with that presence of mind which is so invaluable when sudden danger arises, did not stop to think twice.

His rifle was in his hand, and swinging it around, he dealt the Sioux such a blow on the head that the latter saw a million stars, and lay stunned and confused, and before his scattered senses returned, Nick's knife was plunged to the hilt between his shoulders, his legs and arms stiffened out in a convulsive throe, and he lay dead, without even having opened his lips from the time his glance had first encountered that of the trapper.

Dragging him beyond the edge of the bluff, out of sight of the plain, Nick, having scientifically removed his scalp, proceeded to investigate the whereabouts of his Indian comrades, and returned to the prairie.

He was not long in discovering the little band of horsemen, who were gathered on the prairie several hundred yards away, and judging from

their attitudes that they intended awaiting the return of the last scout sent out, Nick decided that the opportunity was a most favorable one to escape with their horses.

He quickly rejoined Si, and informed him of the state of affairs, gathered the herd of ponies together, fastening them in bunches of six by the lariats hanging to many of the primitive saddles of the Indians, and started south, pausing in front of the dug-out only long enough to fasten the robe-door securely and to cut away the dirt around the holes, which served for steps, so that they could not be used.

The scalp was taken from the dead Indian, lying there, by Old Si, while Ned was engaged in destroying all traces of habitation, and when he was through the closest observer would not have detected any suspicious signs, and no passer-by could have detected the slightest evidence that overhead was a comfortable and commodious shelter which, at the same time, was fort-like in its strength.

The work having been well and thoroughly done, Nick swung into his saddle and riding alongside the herd of captured ponies kept it headed close in to the overhanging bluff, while Old Si, riding in the rear, urged the horses forward at full gallop.

They rode thus for several miles, the course of the stream which they had followed being marked only by water-holes and these at rare intervals, the bed being in the space between merely dry sand. At length they reached a point where a ravine intersected the main valley and here the cavalcade halted.

Leaving the horses in charge of his companion Nick dismounted and proceeded up the ravine on foot, for a mile or more, where stood a ruined cabin, built by some enterprising hunter who, with more courage than brains, had thus defied the Indians in their very stamping-ground.

He was not left long in the enjoyment of his home, for a night attack was quickly followed by his death, and the ranch had only been saved from the flames by a heavy thunder-storm, which, unusual in those latitudes, arose opportunely, drenching everything in the vicinity.

For some reason or another, the Indians had not molested the cabin since that night for some time, at which latter period Nick had appropriated it to his own ends and purposes.

Shortly after he had taken up his abode there he became aware of the approach of a band of Sioux which intended camping there for the night, attracted by the presence of a magnificent spring which gushed from the bank in the rear of the hut, for such it really was, the brook formed by it trickling close to the building running down the ravine for a few yards and then disappearing in the earth in the mysterious manner adopted by Colorado streams.

Nick was in a quandary. The cabin had been built over a natural depression, which, with a little labor, had been transformed into an excellent and quite commodious cellar, and this Nick had appropriated to his own use as a stable for the two horses he had brought from the fort and here they now were.

The ravine, after running up a few hundred yards, came to an abrupt stop, and in that di-

rection there was absolutely no exit, and steep banks precluding all idea of escape. From the other end was now advancing the band of Sioux, and there was Nick and his horses in the middle! The question was how to get out of the scrape.

Among Nick's most intimate friends at the fort, which he most frequented, and which was also the home of his sister, was a young physician, who, recently having received his diploma, had not yet gotten over that spirit of dare-devil recklessness with which all medical students seemed to be imbued, and he was constantly playing the most unheard-of pranks, in many of which he was aided and abetted by our hero Nicholas Parkhurst.

CHAPTER VII.

A TRICK AND ITS RESULT.

ONE of his most successful efforts—resulting in the frightening of an old semi-civilized Indian into temporary lunacy and half idiocy—was performed with Nick's assistance one dark night in July. Blowing strong from the south, the wind increased in violence toward midnight until it became almost a gale, while the rain fell in torrents. It was dark as Erebus, and, to use a familiar expression, "you could not see your hand before your face."

Nick, in anticipation of the coming event, had been treating the aged Indian with much kindness for several days past, and had so won his gratitude that Tish-a-na-o was willing to do anything for him. On the night in question, looking up "Old Tish," as he was always called, Nick took him to the place where he usually slept, it being an outbuilding that was at the present time unused, having been originally built for a kitchen, but found too small as the number of soldiers at the post was increased.

"Tish" was very grateful for this unlooked and unhoped-for shelter, so, when about midnight, he was awakened by Nick, who was rolling about the floor in (apparently) the greatest agony, and asked to go for the doctor, he only too readily assented, and wrapping the blanket, which had served for his bed, about him, proceeded on his errand of mercy.

Scarcely had he disappeared through the door, when Nick's colic disappeared as if by magic, and rising to his feet with a broad grin on his face, he stealthily followed the steps of the savage, who, buffeting the wind and the rain, struggled on his way to the doctor's quarters.

Arrived there, he found all dark, and, guided by feeling and instinct, groped along the building until he reached the door, when he knocked loudly.

Scarcely had his knuckles left the door when the latter swung open, mysteriously and silently, and there, right in front of him, with arms outstretched; with grinning, cavernous jaws; with luminous eye-sockets, stood a skeleton, each rib and limb outlined in a dim, wavering light, with a dancing, tremulous, smoky appearance glancing over the whole figure, and without moving hand or foot, advanced slowly toward him.

One look was enough. A wild yell and the Indian fell to the ground in a fit that came near carrying him to the land of skeletons for good and all, and it was with the utmost difficulty that the doctor and Nick succeeded in restoring him, only to find that his mind had been injured by the shock.

From his mutterings it was easy to learn that, thoroughly superstitious as he was, he thought that he was too late; that Nick had died in his absence, and that it was the ghost of the deceased that thus menacingly confronted him at the doctor's door.

The trick was a simple one, but well calculated to frighten the untutored Tish-a-na-o nearly out of his senses. The young doctor, like most recent graduates, was the owner of a skeleton, of which he was immensely proud, and which he kept hung up in a closet in his bedroom.

But one or two persons at the fort had seen the skeleton, among the number being Nick. One evening, when the plan to frighten poor "Tish" was concocted, the doctor took Nick into his room, proceeded to rub each and every bone of his pet with phosphorus, turned out the light and there, one mass of mysterious, sickly light, stood the skeleton.

Knowing as he did what it was, the sight nearly paralyzed Nick, whose discomfiture was much enjoyed by wetting a match and then marking the wall in the dark, except that it was, naturally, much heightened.

Nick's delight at the success of the trick was unbounded and he begged Dr. Saunders to give him a supply of the devil's fire as he not inaptly termed it. The doctor willingly acquiesced and gave him a small vial, containing several sticks of the chemical, immersed in water to prevent spontaneous combustion.

And the recollection of this gave Nick a clew as to how he could escape the threatened invasion by the Sioux that evening when escape seemed impossible.

Hastily preparing a broad plank that had once served as a portion of the door, by rubbing a mixture of grease and charcoal over it, he took his bottle of phosphorus from a corner where it was hidden and rapidly sketched the outlines of a skeleton on the black. Under Dr. Saunders's tuition he had become quite an artist, so succeeded in producing quite a respectable skeleton.

He then placed the board against the wall, just opposite the opening where the door had formerly been, closed the shutter of the solitary window and awaited results.

Outside, evening was rapidly approaching, while in the hut it was as "dark as a pocket."

Nothing could be seen of the illuminated skeleton, for Nick had placed the side containing it toward the wall of the cabin, stationing himself alongside his work of art.

The Indians, six in number, rode rapidly up to the cabin, dismounted and turned their mustangs loose, after hopping them. They drank at the spring and then approached the cabin.

All was still as night and they suspected no danger, so the foremost boldly strode into the single room.

There was an instant of silence and then a

wild yell, that was startling in its intensity of terror, rung on the night air, and the affrighted savage, tearing through his astonished companions, never stopped until he reached the ponies.

His amazed comrades, thinking him suddenly bewitched, gazed after him in awe, and then turning, resolved to enter the cabin and investigate its hidden mystery, so advanced in a bunch.

Arrived near the door they halted, overcome by unknown fears, and peered anxiously into the darkness, and there, glowing with an unnatural weirdness, stood precisely such an apparition as had so terrified Old "Tish."

One look was enough and overcome by their ever present superstition the band, yelling, fled as if possessed of many devils while Nick leaped to the threshold of the door, lasso in hand, and bending a little, launched it.

True as the arrow to the mark it flew and caught the hindmost Sioux fair below his Adam's apple where it settled and tightened under Nick's steady and ever-increasing pull, until he lay strangled and dead under the noose.

The rest of the band, numbering four, not casting in their stampede, a look behind, reached their *cayuses*, tore the hay hobbles from their legs, and dragging the first of their number who had entered the hut, after them, on his horse, dashed down the ravine and off on the prairie for miles.

Nick's repetition of the phosphorus trick had succeeded beyond his most sanguine expectations and had left him richer by a scalp and a pony—naming the prizes in the order of their value to "Neck-Tie."

Nor was this all of the advantage gained. From thence on for all time, the vicinage of Nick's retreat was inviolable, for no savage would venture within some miles of the supposed haunted spot.

All of the band had seen the apparition. One of their number had disappeared without uttering a cry or giving a sound that he had been immolated. The warrior who had first seen the luminous skeleton was a hopeless and raving maniac.

These were sufficient for the rest of the band who still retained their lives and their senses, and they firmly believed that the ghost of the aged hunter who had built the cabin, was now the terrible guardian of his former home.

So Nick was safe in his cabin, and utilized it always afterward, when at the dug-out, by turning the cellar into stables, where he quartered his two horses, so managing matters that they should not suffer either from hunger or thirst during his enforced absences.

But he has been left long enough on his expedition to the cabin after the horses, while Old Si is patiently awaiting his reappearance, and the thread of the story has been broken at considerable length, and must be taken up again without further delay.

Arrived at the cabin, Nick, with a grin of pleasure at the recollection of the trick he had played on the unsuspecting Indians, descended into the cellar, threw open the door, and was greeted with a whinny of pleasure by the two

noble brutes which wandered at will within the confines of their habitation.

Nick loved his horses, and always treated them with that kindness which a generous man always shows to dumb domestic servants, and was faithfully served in return, his steeds always seeming to work with more willingness when their master bestrode them than when a strange hand held the lines.

Having groomed and watered the animals, Nick mounted his favorite, Black Bess, and followed by the other without leading-reins, rode at a rapid pace down the valley toward the river, where Old Si waited with the captured herd.

Arrived at the point where the ravine was merged into the larger valley, Nick gave a quick glance around.

Nothing was in sight, and the entire space covered by Neck-tie Nick's rapid glances was bare of human or animal life. The herd of horses, with their keeper, had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up, as it swallowed the river which flowed below.

Nick's heart ceased to beat, and leaping to the ground he eagerly scanned every blade of grass, every particle of disturbed earth that lay before him in the neighborhood of the stopping-place, but uselessly.

The feet of the captured herd had left only undistinguishable marks, and Nick was about to begin a wider circuit in search of something like a trail, when— Hal he has a clew.

Cut in the side of the bluff, about the height of a man's head when on horseback, was a rude imitation of an arrow, with the head pointing south, while in an extraordinary flourish flowed an uncouth "S" just below, which was immediately recognized by the young fellow as Old Si's sign-manual.

Nick's heart beat high once more, for he imagined that his companion, thinking it better to move on with the cavalcade, and let the other follow, had continued in the direction of the fort.

This was partially true, and "Neck-Tie" followed, while away on the other bluff a pair of black eyes malignantly and exultingly followed his course.

Nick rode on unsuspectingly.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AMBUSH FOR MR. PARKHURST.

IN the mean time what had become of Old Si?

Left in charge of the cavalcade, he sat for a time, leisurely surveying the landscape and humming, beneath his breath, the old-time song of California:

"You're gazing now on old Tom Moore,
A relic of bygone days."

Finally he descended to the ground, stretched his leg and took a step or two eastward to a point where a better view of the valley, north and south, could be obtained, and from there gazed long and earnestly in the direction whence they had come.

Suddenly he stooped, shaded his eyes with his hand and peered closely at certain dark but indistinct forms that rose and fell with a swaying motion, like the balancing of a ship upon a gentle swell, and which grew more and more distinct as they rapidly approached along the western brink of the bank which was yet steep and unscalable.

"Injuns, Jehosophat!" ejaculated the old hunter as he arose from his stooping position and hurriedly drew near and under the shelter of the bank. "An' not the same band o' Sioux we seen back yonder. No time to warn Nick. Guess that lad's cute enuff ter take a hint, so yer' goes," and the old man with a sweep of his hunting-knife, made the marks in the bluff which had attracted Nick's attention.

It was evidently better to drive on the ponies and let Nick follow at speed than to waste valuable time waiting for him, and this course was adopted by Old Si. He did not much dread the band of Indians that he had discovered, for he knew that they could not follow straight down the bluff, but must make a lengthy detour so as to avoid the ravine in which was Nick's cabin, and which intersected their course.

He therefore urged the captured band of ponies forward at full speed, following close behind and "encouraging" the laggards with his stinging "quirt," the rapid gait thus assumed soon taking the band of horses far below the ravine into a more sheltered spot where there was ample grass and numerous water-holes for the horses to drink.

Here they halted.

Soon after the cavalcade had swept out of sight, a new actor appeared on the scene in the person of a young buck, gaudily attired yet not in full war-paint.

He was on the eastern bank of the bluff, and was not mounted, evidently having left his horse some distance back on the prairie to graze with the rest of the band to which he was attached, as it was not probable that he would be afoot so far from any permanent Indian village.

As he stepped to the edge of the bluff, Nick rode into view and stopped, and as he did so the wary Indian threw himself flat on the ground and watched the unsuspecting trapper who, after seeing and correctly interpreting Old Si's directions, turned south and rode away at a moderate rate of speed.

This, then, was the situation. Down the valley, four or five miles, Old Si and the band of horses were resting; up the valley was Nick, riding and leading his spare horse, while on the eastern side was a solitary Indian watching Nick and on the western the band discovered by Si approaching at a rapid gallop, but beginning to diverge somewhat to the west, as if the presence of the intersecting ravine were known to them.

A long whoop from the savage on the eastern bluff roused Nick from a reverie into which he had fallen and wherein a certain dainty little beauty of the fort figured prominently, and he gazed startled, in the direction of the sound, but there was nothing in sight.

Certain that he had not been deceived, he sat, holding his horse in readiness for instant flight, yet undecided as to whether or no he had better

attempt to fathom the mystery, a few moments deciding him that the danger was not so pressing but that he had some minutes to spare.

In a moment more he discovered something moving slowly, to and fro, on the eastern bluff. A something which did not seem much larger than the beaver-skin cap he wore and which appeared either to be suspended in the air or held up on a ramrod, arrow or such-like object, the distance from one side of the valley to the other being too great to readily distinguish anything with certainty.

"Some Injun trick, I reckon," muttered Nick, "an' I'll jest wait here, an' see the thing out. It'll give Old Si a start, anyhow," and Master Nick, with the coolness for which he was noted over the plains, threw himself from the saddle, and, lying on the grass, awaited developments.

He was close under the western bank; so close that had he stretched his hand he could have touched it, but his entire attention was concentrated on the bluff opposite where the mysterious waving of the mysterious object continued without ceasing for an hour or more.

Suddenly a second object appeared alongside the first and was violently agitated. This was becoming interesting and Nick sat up, then stood up, wondering what on earth it all meant, while his horses grazing near by, and too well trained to stray looked up at him and snorted as though there were danger in the air.

It is the unknown in this world (and the next) which is most to be dreaded and so it was in this case, the mystery of the whole proceeding dazing Nick, and, despite himself, rendering him nervous and timorous, until he almost persuaded himself to mount and ride away after his partner and, returning with him, endeavor to solve the enigma which confronted him.

From such action, however, he was deterred by a circumstance which, as far as he was concerned, settled any action on his part.

"If they were out on the plain," mused Nick, dropping into that more educated form of speech that was natural to him, "I should think that they were trying to lure those inquisitive creatures, antelope, to them; but that seems hardly possible. Yet how explain it? They are not surely trying to decoy me over there—I'm too old a bird for that, and am not—"

A crash and a groan, and Neck-tie Nick fell to the ground as though shot through the heart.

One of the band of Indians that had warned Old Si to leave that place had crawled to the edge of the bluff, having ridden with his comrades close to the bank; had weighted his rawhide saddle with a buffalo-robe and had dropped it plumb on Nick's head as he stood gazing in the opposite direction, his heavy beaver-skin cap alone saving his skull from being crushed in.

A yell of mingled triumph and exultation arose from the opposite bank, a quarter of a mile away, as Nick fell, which was answered by the band on the western bluff, and the savages, having dismounted, walked to the edge of the bluff and looked down upon their fallen foe, who lay prone and lifeless twenty feet below them. Their enemy was at their mercy, and they proceeded to consult as to the best means

of securing his scalp if he were dead and to make him a prisoner if he were alive.

There was no descent into the valley for miles in either direction, and the question was how to reach Nick's body without retracing their steps or riding over the distance that separated them from the lower route. Signals from the band on the other side showed that they were in a like quandary and were powerless to reach the victim unless they should ride several miles also.

The entire party, comprising both those on the eastern and those on the western bluffs, did not number a dozen warriors, and the two bands were about equally divided, five being on the side where Nick lay, and now in deep and earnest consultation as to how they should reach their prey.

They had recognized Nick, who was hated and feared all through the Sioux country, and were determined not to depart without the much-prized trophy which is the proof of the prowess of the braves to their admiring village maidens, squaws and old men who are too aged to take the field and bend the bow, or wield the tomahawk with the younger braves.

The matter was soon decided, and one of the lightest and slimmest of the warriors, stepping forward, placed the noose of a horse-hair lariat beneath his arms, so arranging it that it would not draw too tight, and was lowered by his comrades over the bluff to the ground below, where, loosening the loop, he stepped forward to Nick's side and placed his hand on the latter's heart, opening his hunting-shirt for that purpose.

A gleam of exultant and malignant cruelty overspread his pained features as he detected a faint beat, and with a guttural "Ugh" addressed to his comrades above, and a nod, he proceeded to arrange matters so that Nick could be drawn up by the same means that had sufficed for his captor's descent.

Dragging the inanimate body of the wounded trapper close under the bank, he attached the lariat under his arm-pits, around his body, and looking up, was about to motion to his comrades to haul away, when he perceived that they were in considerable of a commotion, gazing at the opposite bank, and talking and gesticulating in much excitement.

There was evidently trouble in the band on the opposite side, for there also seemed to be much gesticulating and excited conversation, although it seemed to be confined to the warriors composing the group, as they paid no attention to their surroundings, and had ceased to gaze with interest upon Nick and his captors as they had previously done.

The dispute seemed to be confined to two of the savages, for they confronted each other closely, shaking threatening fingers in each others' faces, and menacingly clutching their tomahawks and keen scalping-knives, while the others, although apparently attempting to dissuade them from anything like violence, did not appear to be making any very strenuous efforts to restrain them from shedding each other's blood, should they be so inclined, so fond of the sight of the red fluid is our bronze brother of the plains.

The excited controversy continued at some

length, until at length the ungovernable rage of the Indians burst all bounds, and they flew at each other as one tiger in the jungle leaps upon the other, or as two buffalo-bulls with lowered heads and fury-gleaming eyes rush into a collision that makes the earth tremble.

But quick as they were, the one who seemed to be highest in authority in the band was quicker than they, for he, having been warily watching their every move and weighing every word, sprung between them, and with uplifted tomahawk, commanded them to desist; which command, so much a respecter of their chiefs are they, was instantly obeyed by the two combatants.

Then motioning the two to stand a little back from each other, the young chief addressed them. He was aware, he said, that insults had passed, which only blood could wash away, but custom was sacred, and if there were to be a duel to the death, one or the other must have the choice of weapons. Which one, must be decided by lot, as neither one of the two had been particularly the aggressor; and, stooping, he plucked two blades of grass of different lengths, which he held out in silence to the enemies of the moment.

He who stood to the south reached forth and drew his bit of herbage on which hung his life, the other following with a like movement, and measuring with his eye the difference in length of the green spears that gave the choice.

The first who had drawn gave a savage yell, leaped back, and drawing his tomahawk from its resting-place, flung it far away onto the plain, where its keen edge buried itself in the earth to the handle, and the deadly instrument there stuck, quivering, and this determined that the duel was to be fought with knives; so the other party to the fray likewise threw away his hatchet, rid himself of all likely to incumber him during the coming combat, and sprung to the edge of the bluff, naked and as Nature made him, save for the breech-clout which hung at his loins, and the stripes of paint that streaked his, by no means prepossessing visage.

His opponent was soon ready, and, outlined against the sky, the actors in this fearful drama stood up like silhouettes, while Nick, recovering his scattered senses, gazed, an eager spectator, thankful for his brief respite from the thongs that would surely bind him a little later on, yet not daring to move.

It was the work of a moment. The warrior who had won the choice was evidently more skilled in the use of the knife than his adversary, and, narrowing the distance which separated them, stood, stooping and twisting and turning and writhing, until he saw an opening, and dashed under the other's guard.

An upper blow of the left arm under the other's right, a quick twist of the heel into the ankle of the leg, a sinuous turn, and, as the other staggered, a quick thrust, a deadly plunge of the keen blade, and the warrior, stabbed in the left side to the vitals, shrieked his death-cry, turned in a dizzy circle twice around, and then, collapsing, fell, an inert mass of bloody flesh, into the void below, crushing out what life was left in a deadened crash.

CHAPTER IX.

A SHOT FOR A LIFE.

INDIAN stoicism admitted of no display of emotion, so that little feeling was manifested by the spectators of this combat, which would not have shamed the gladiatorial days of Old Rome.

The anticipation of the magnificent capture that they had made; of the welcome they would receive when, returning to their village, they would bear with them the terror of their race—Neck-Tie Nick; the hope of inflicting upon him the severest tortures that Indian ingenuity could devise; all these tended to distract the thoughts of Nick's captors, and well-nigh rendered them oblivious of everything else.

So they prepared to drag him to the top of the bluff, there to tie him securely upon a wiry mustang and bear him away to their village in the North, where he would be sport for all the urchins of the tribe, and would prove, by his unshaken stoicism, that he could die as he had lived—a man.

In the mean time Old Si, far below, was "git-tin' onrestless," as he put it. Time sufficient had elapsed for Nick to have rejoined him, and knowing of the presence of the Indians and Nick's everpresent carelessness, he feared that something had happened to his pal, and finally became too uneasy to remain quiet any longer.

Leaving the ponies quietly feeding, therefore, he mounted his mustang, turned his head north, and retraced his steps of a few hours before, urging his willing steed to a steady lope, and keeping a sharp and watchful lookout along the bluffs ahead.

As he drew near to the place where Nick had met with his disaster, his quick eye discovered the little band of Indians, outlined against the sky, long before he could be seen, and stopping his mustang he slid into the long grass and, with a swinging trot, rapidly approached the scene of the Indian duel, of which he was an interested witness, and the result of which pleased him greatly.

So engrossed were the savages in the fight that he was able to approach within a hundred yards of his partner, and there he halted, nonplused and at a loss how to proceed. He feared to fire lest Nick's life should pay the forfeit, and he waited, trusting that some unforeseen occurrence might arise, which would aid him in coming to a conclusion as to how he ought to act.

The Indian who had Nick in charge, having carefully adjusted the noose, removed Nick's knife from its sheath, and signaled to his comrades above to "haul away," and Neck-Tie swung into the air like a bale of cotton hoisted by a derrick, the savage below aiding by "boosting," and enjoying himself by sticking the point of Nick's knife into the soles of the latter's feet.

Nick was a pretty husky kind of a lad, and the lift was a heavy one, so his ascent was very gradual, the four muscular savages on the bank above straining and tugging with all their might.

The sight of his partner swinging there helpless, like a bale of rags, was too much for Old Si, so leveling his rifleplumb at the breast of the Indian, who, nearest to him, was pulling on the

rope, touched the trigger and the faithful rifle spoke quick in reply.

The bullet sped true to its mark, struck the savage at whom it have been aimed fair in the breast, went through and through his body, and severely wounded the next one behind him on the rope, both of the men releasing the lariat and falling back in a heap upon the others, the result being that all tumbled together in a confused mass upon the sward.

A more astonished set of copper-skinned brethren it would be difficult to imagine, and not the least so was the one who had aided Nick's ascent by puncturing his feet with the knife-point.

The rope being released Nick fell heavily back, and, as the Indian was right under him, the hundred and eighty pounds of the trapper, coming suddenly and unexpectedly on his shoulders, crushed him to the earth in a heap, and from that moment he was a dead Indian.

Nick's senses had been completely restored some time before the hoisting process began, and when his journey through the air commenced he had all of his wits about him, and, as the crack of Si's rifle was as familiar to him as the old man's voice, he comprehended matters in an instant, and was immediately ready for action.

As he fell, therefore, he was prepared for the shock, and, bracing himself, drove his feet down into the upturned face of the Indian, thereby adding to the force of his fall, and then leaping on his foe, he held him firmly with oneoccasined foot on the warrior's neck until he loosened the noose which held him fast.

Slipping the horse-hair loop around the savage's neck he rolled him over on his face, gave a pull or two with his foot between the shoulders of the prostrate man and added another to the long list of dead that bore Neck-Tie's fatal mark when they left this world. And so the horse-hair lariat of the Indian had been the means of his own death.

Old Si had meantime reloaded, but there was nothing to fear; the Indians—at least those who had escaped—were far over the plain by this time, and were plying cruel quirts to their flying steeds to increase their speed, while the Indians on the opposite bank vented their rage as impotent cries, being too far off to harm the trappers and unable to descend into the valley even had they dared.

"Another added to the number of times you saved my life, Si," said Nick, speaking with much feeling and emotion. "Will I ever, I wonder, get anywhere near even with you?"

"Jest yer let that ben sot, lad," returned the old man. "Thar's no question o' debts between us. But gether up yer traps, ther hull country's a-swarmin' wi' Injuns, and we must make tracks fer ther ranch an' let ther cayuses go. Come along."

Old Si was right. The only thing to do was to return to the dug-out and fortify themselves again, while waiting for a better chance to escape and reach the fort.

A whistle from Nick brought his two horses trotting up, and having secured his rifle and knife, Nick mounted one while Si took possession of the other, and with another trophy in

the shape of a scalp dangling at his belt, Neck-Tie led the way, at full gallop toward the dug-out, not daring to leave the horses in their usual quarters at the haunted cabin.

The band of Indians on the other side of the valley followed their movements and rode along as rapidly as they could, endeavoring to keep pace with them, but finding their ponies far inferior in point of speed to the magnificent animals ridden by the two trappers.

As they rode along, Si explained to Nick that he had cut the sign of the arrow in the bank with a barb, thereby denoting that there were Indians in sight, but this fact Nick, with his usual carelessness, had overlooked and thereby gotten into trouble.

The Indians they had been fighting last evidently belonged to a hunting-party, as was discovered by the arrows found in the quiver of the dead savage strangled by Nick, for in hunting the buffalo the red-men use no barbs on their arrows, they being merely pointed that they may the more readily be withdrawn and used again, something that is very difficult when the arrow is held in its place by a barb.

With the horses they had, it would have possibly been easy to escape from the warriors that they had encountered, but everything tended to the belief that a large war-party of Sioux was scouring the country, and signals would be sent out which, in the event of there being any Indians in the south, would have resulted in an ambush and a possible massacre of the trappers. For this as well as other reasons, it was deemed best to defer their departure for some days.

Nothing of note occurred during their hurried ride to the dug-out, until they had nearly arrived, when a shout of triumph from the scouting-party on the bluff warned them to draw rein and reconnoiter, for the Indians, being so much higher placed, commanded a view of that portion of the valley which, by a bend in the bluff, was yet hidden from the trappers.

What was the cause of this sudden outburst from their foes? Had they seen others of their band coming down the valley and so near that it was but a question of a few moments that they would attack? A short time would reveal, and so Nick and Si sat like statues on their horses, awaiting developments, until the whiz of an accurately-aimed arrow startled them into action.

It was a narrow escape and only the stout belt worn by Neck-Tie saved him from a serious, perhaps a mortal, wound, and as it was the point of the arrow remained sticking in his side to be withdrawn by Nick, examined and handed to Si with the remark: "Huntin' arrow."

Scarce had the words left his lips when a second missile flew past him and lodged in the bank near by, but it had scarce found a resting-place in the earth before Nick, turning his horse with a sharp pull, wheeled into the tall grass where a waving of the herbage showed him that the attacking party must be and rode right down on the would-be assassin.

A few bounds of his horse brought him close and he bending low suddenly escaped a third arrow aimed at his breast and gave chase to the

bowman before the latter could fit another dart to his bow-string and the Indian sought safety in flight, looking back at the Fate that was pursuing him so relentlessly, with terror in his eyes.

He soon left the grass and took to the open, and, knowing that his life depended on it, ran with the speed of a startled deer up the valley, whence arose a thundering shout, and where were gathered the band to which he belonged, numbering some fifty bucks with the usual complement of squaws, ponies, etc., that go to make up a hunting-party.

Nick pressed closer with swinging lariat in his hand, while from the hunting-party a dozen warriors rode out to intercept him and, if possible, save the life of their hard-pressed companion, who was using his best efforts to reach them.

It was nip and tuck, but Nick's Missouri-bred mare was the favorite in the race and soon brought him within reaching distance of his victim, and, measuring the distance with his eye, he launched the fatal noose. It hovered over the fleeing Indian for a moment like some great hawk circling over a brood of chickens and then swooped over his head onto his bare and brown shoulders.

As the noose settled Nick took a turn with the end of the lariat around the horn of his saddle and reined in his horse, who, trained to hold the strongest Texan steers, settled back on his haunches and braced himself for the shock.

With a twang like a bow-string the cord tightened, the shock of the sudden pull throwing the Indian off of his feet and jerking him high into the air, while his neck cracked like a pistol-shot, so suddenly was it broken, and Nick, turning his horse, and dragging his prey after him, started back down the valley at full speed, the corpse of the dead savage bounding after like some great red football.

But Nick's "vaulting ambition" had "o'erleaped itself," this time at least, for the foremost of Indian antagonists were within reaching distance and he received a touch of his own medicine.

A brawny brave, pressing eagerly forward, got withing reaching distance and skillfully threw his lasso on to the ground so that, with a well-timed lift, the hind-legs of Nick's horse became entangled in the noose and he fell heavily to the ground, throwing his rider high into the air, and off into the grass at one side, the latter breaking his fall and saving him from any serious injury.

Before he could rise a half-dozen of the Indians were on him, and although he fought desperately, using his knife with terrible effect, and although Si's rifle cracked twice with deadly results, the young trapper was at length overpowered, a blow from the side of a tomahawk stretching him senseless and leaving him captive in the hands of his enemies, who quickly bound him and left him lying there while they gave chase to Old Si.

The aged trapper was, however, too well mounted and they quickly desisted from the chase, seeing that his fresh horse could easily outstrip their tired ponies, already worn out from a long buffalo-hunt held that morning,

and returned to Nick whom they found just recovering his senses.

The events of the day had been numerous and stirring, and the trapper felt faint and thirsty, but did not deign to show a sign of his weakness to his captors. The sun was getting low in the West and he supposed that no move in any direction would be made that night, particularly as he saw that the squaws had come up with the camp-equipage and were preparing the tepees, while the rest of the warriors gathered around him and, with malignant glances testified to their undying hatred.

A glance around showed Nick that they were almost opposite the dug-out, the existence of which, however, was apparently unknown to the Indians, and, indeed, it would have been impossible for Nick to have located it, had it not been for the water-mark which stood directly above, and pointed it out distinctly to any one familiar with the secret of the dwelling.

Soon the lodge-poles were unloaded from the ponies; a blazing fire was built and huge chunks of meat were roasting, or rather burning before the flames, while the bucks lounged about, smoking and interchanging ideas, leaving the squaws to attend to all the work.

It is no part of the Indian policy to weaken a prisoner who is intended for the torture, and, although Nick's feet remained securely fastened by strips of rawhide, the thongs that bound his hands were loosened, and he was given as much water as he could drink and a huge piece of meat with which to stay his hunger.

He was well aware that he was thus treated with apparent kindness only to enable him better to withstand the torture and that the Indians fed him as the cannibals feed their prisoners—to make them fat; yet as the idea of escape was the uppermost in his mind, he ate heartily and felt much refreshed and strengthened after his meal, and prepared for any emergency that might arise.

His only anxiety was to communicate with his partner and he managed to secure a piece of deerskin on which he marked with a piece of charred wood: "Stay here, X days," and threw to one side without being observed.

If Si found it he would obey the injunction and remain at least that long awaiting Nick's return and then would take means to relieve him, so Nick, relieved in mind and body and attached by the wrists to two guards, was soon in a sound and peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER X.

RUNNING THE GANTLET

THE morning broke clear as a maiden's tear, and not a breath of air was stirring; the smoke from the Indian fires rising straight toward the blue vault above, while all was bustle and confusion in the camp, as preparations for departure were hurriedly pushed forward, the squaws, naturally, doing all the work, while the bucks gorged themselves with the proceeds of the preceding day's hunt.

When all was ready, the Indians who had charge of Neck-Tie Nick mounted him upon a

wiry mustang, tying his feet underneath with a piece of lariat, while his hands were loosely bound together. To prevent any possibility of escape, a thong of buckskin was fastened to the pony's muzzle, the ends of which were held by a mounted guard riding on either side of him.

A good night's rest had completely restored the young trapper, and excepting a slight pain in his head where the blow of the tomahawk had felled him, he felt as well as ever, and ready to take advantage of the slightest circumstance which might offer, although at present, there did not seem to be the slightest prospect of escape.

The entire body was soon in motion, and struck rapidly north in the direction of the main encampment, which, judging from remarks interchanged by his guides, Nick imagined to be about a day's ride distant.

With the exception of a short halt made at noon to allow the mustangs to graze and rest for a time, no stop was made until evening, when scouts were sent in advance, the main body remaining quiet until their return.

Soon they came back with the information that all was well, and the cavalcade moved on, reaching the temporary village soon after dark, and riding in amidst a perfect Babel of sound, in which the yells of the warriors, the screams of the squaws, the cries of the children, the yelping of dogs, and the whinnying of horses all mingled and strove for the mastery.

The scouts had conveyed the intelligence of Nick's capture to the village, and all was joy and exultation over the capture of their enemy, whom they so much feared and hated; for he had been the scourge of the red-men ever since he had first taken up his abode on the plains and waged relentless war against the tribe that had destroyed his home and murdered his parents.

The savage nature was more fully aroused when the pony bearing the corpse of Nick's last victim was led into the village. Two lodge-poles, the smaller ends trailing on the ground, the larger ones being fastened on each side of a pony, had served for a bier, the body being wrapped in a blanket, and secured between the poles behind the pony.

The dead man had been prominent in his tribe for his savage cruelty as well as for his cunning, and was a great loss, having been the strategist as well as the leader in many of the Indian raids against other tribes. And so when his death was made known the rage was fearful, and only more intensified by the sight of his body.

His family, more than all the rest of the tribe, were aroused to a pitch of ferocity that was demoniac in its fierceness, and the insults that they showered upon Nick were calculated to drive him to desperation, had he not steeled himself to bear them.

The prisoner was, however, protected to some extent, by his captors, who prevented any serious injury befalling him, and was soon safely ensconced in a lodge situated near the middle of the village, when, bound hand and foot with thongs which cut deeply into the flesh, he was thrown like a log to pass the night, while a chosen guard watched him closely, so noted was his prowess, so famed was he for actions of skill and of strength.

The next day the council was held in the great lodge, and here the chiefs assembled to deliberate on the fate of the captive and to decide upon the manner of his death; for that any other punishment could be inflicted was out of the question—death, and death alone, could atone for the many victims he had snatched from the ranks of the Yanktonnais Sioux.

The council was a full one and the deliberations long and ample, the conclusions being—torture and death at the stake. Nick heard the result announced with that coolness which he had preserved throughout the proceedings, yet there was a deep-seated anxiety in his heart, which, while not apparent on the surface, was none the less felt, for he saw not one ray of hope to give him courage to face the coming ordeal.

He realized that, as the torture was to commence on the following morning at sunrise, he had less than twenty-four hours in which to plan, mature and put into execution any scheme for escape, and that when he was returned to his prison, the watch would be doubled and not the slightest loop-hole afforded for avoiding his terrible fate.

He noticed, with a mingled feeling of joy and pain, as he was led from the Medicine Lodge to his quarters, that his horse was staked among the Indian herd, and, whistling as he passed, was glad to see the intelligent brute raise his head and recognize him with a whinny of recognition, as it tried to break away from the lariat-pin and reach him.

Again he was thrown into his prison and left to his own reflections, while a cordon of sentries surrounded the tepee, and rendered flight impossible, even had he been free from the bonds which galled and cut his flesh at wrist and ankles.

Thus the greater part of the day passed, relieved from its unbearable monotony only by the entrance of one of his guards bearing a bowl of water, and a dish of stew that might have been dog for all that he knew to the contrary, yet of which he partook with a relish, so strongly does Nature assert herself among the most unusual surroundings.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, Nick, who had fallen into a troubled doze, was awakened by an unusual excitement and clamor in the village, and although he did not imagine that he was immediately concerned, yet he was somewhat interested in what might be going on, so called one of his guards, who was standing in the opening that served as a door, and asked him the cause of the tumult.

He soon learned that he was somewhat interested in the occurrences that were taking place outside, for the guard, in no spirit of kindness, informed him that the squaw of "Cloud that Sails," as the Indian he had lassoed just before his capture was called, had demanded that, previous to the torture, the white prisoner be given up to her and her friends, that they might wreak a little preliminary vengeance, and to this request the chiefs had acceded.

The old hag had therefore called together her family, relatives and friends, the whole number comprising nearly the whole village, and announced to them that, as the prisoner had

been released to her for a short time, she proposed that he should be made to run the gantlet, a proposition which was hailed with acclamation on all sides, while each and every one of her listeners hurried away to arm themselves with whatever instrument they could find, provided it was something that would not inflict a mortal wound.

The sun was about an hour high, when Nick was led out to undergo this species of savage cruelty, which sometimes leads to the victim's death if he be not agile, swift, strong and determined.

At a glance he saw the ordeal which he must undergo. A long lane had been formed, the walls of which were squaws, young bucks who had not yet attained the dignity of warriors, young girls and boys and a swarm of children; all armed with every instrument of punishment that could be devised or which the instinct of cruelty could invent.

Some had partially blunted arrows with which to prod the runner as he passed; others had bows with which cruel blows could be inflicted; others again had pieces of wood which, though not very heavy, could inflict a severe bruise, while others held thongs of rawhide, weighted at the end with small pebbles and with pieces of sharpened flint plaited in.

Stationed about the middle of the lines were the squaw and immediate family of the dead man, while at the further end, and scattered along the outside of the human lane were the bucks of the tribe, ready to prevent any attempt on the part of the prisoner to escape.

Nick stood and surveyed all of these preparations with a smile of contempt, while his appearance was the signal for a storm of cries and yells all along the line, while the participants shouted to the guards to loosen their prey, a young urchin stealing up behind and inserting a thorn into the calf of the trapper's leg a good half-inch, without causing him to wince.

His bonds cast off, Neck-Tie was stripped to the waist, and left for a moment to chafe his wrists and ankles that the blood might flow more freely and enable him to use his limbs to better advantage.

He stood thus for a moment, studying the situation. The course he must follow led up the side of a gently-sloping hill, and once at the top of the declivity, he would be safe from any further attacks by those composing the gantlet, and this he hoped to reach with only a few cuts and bruises.

At one side, near the brow of the hill, the Indian mustangs were feeding, and with a thrill of joy he saw his own steed standing almost alone and loosely tethered. Far down the line he could distinguish the malignant countenance of the old squaw, and gleaming in her hand he perceived, half hidden in the folds of her blanket, the glistening blade of a tomahawk.

The old squaw meant, should he reach her post without being tripped up and half beaten to death, to inflict a death-blow upon him as he passed, and thus avenge the death of her husband.

Nick's mind, after this discovery, was quickly made up. He stooped and rubbed his ankles vigorously for a few moments, straightened up,

and glancing far over the hill, gave utterance to a loud yell of astonishment, and pointed in the direction in which he was gazing.

Every eye followed the direction of his finger, and taking advantage of the diversion thus afforded in his favor, Neck-Tie bounded up the lane with the velocity of an arrow, and had traversed fully one-third of the distance he had to run before the participants in the "sport" had recovered from their surprise.

His ruse had so far succeeded that he had escaped all danger from those who formed the first portion of the line, and loud were their cries of vexation and rage as they found themselves cheated of their prey, while the older warriors outside the line shook their sides in stolid amusement at their discomfiture.

But Ned was not yet out of the toils. Blows were hailed on him from every side; feet were put out to trip him up and thongs of buckskin were stretched from one side of the lane to the other to throw him down. Cruel wounds were inflicted by the blunted arrows, and raining down on his head was a shower of blows from clubs and blows that dazed and confused him, yet he kept on, straight as a plumb-line, in the direction of the goal.

Streaming with blood from numerous wounds, dripping with perspiration at every pore, Nick stumbled, staggered and nearly fell as a severer blow than usual fell upon his unprotected head, but recovering himself, he rallied, turned, grasped the club from the youth who held it, and thus partially armed, darted on his way.

But now the greatest danger of his course confronted him, for he reached the spot where were gathered the immediate family of his last victim, and they were blind with rage and thirsting, as only can thirst the savage, for his heart's blood.

Nick realized that the moment of defeat or victory had now arrived, and, bracing himself, with a mighty effort he sprang forward with renewed strength and rapidly approached the squaw who held aloft the gleaming hatchet.

Quick as he was, she dealt him a blow on the left shoulder that cut through skin, flesh and muscle and caused the crimson fluid to gush forth in a blinding stream, yet even this did not stop the indomitable trapper, for, drawing a deep breath, he uttered a shrill whistle which echoed far and wide and reached the ears of the intelligent animal for which it was intended.

Then pausing and half-turning, with a superhuman effort and mighty bound he cleared the heads of those surrounding him and stood freed from the howling crowd, while confronting him was a single stalwart savage, who alone barred his path, the rest of the braves being at the end of the line, where they could better see the "finish."

Raising his club on high Nick brought it down on the head of the burly Indian, his skull crushing beneath the blow as if it had been an egg-shell, when, bounding over his prostrate body, Nick sped on to where his willing steed, having torn the picket-pin from the turf, was galloping to meet him.

A word, a caress, and he was on the animal's back, and with no saddle, no bridle, tearing over the prairie at a rate of speed which bade

fair to soon carry him far from the Indian village and away beyond the reach of the wolf-like savages who had already mounted and were swiftly giving chase to their escaped prisoner.

The night air revived Nick, and, with words of encouragement to his bonny black steed, he sped on through the gathering shades of the night to the spot which had so often sheltered him before.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MASSACRE.

ON through the rapidly-disappearing twilight; on over the wide-spreading prairie; on, with rattlesnakes gliding swiftly out of his pathway, while coyotes howled on either side and gaunt forms of gray wolves scampered off into the distance, and the miles fled behind the Missouri mare and her rider as the hours slipped by and the free air blew fresh in their faces.

Keeping the North Star well over his right shoulder, the young trapper pursued his course as unerringly as does the sailor on trackless seas with the aid of his unfailing friend, the compass, and soon the landmarks that were familiar to him drew in sight, and Nick knew that another sun would see him close to his home.

A slight breeze, blowing from the northeast, had arisen by the time the Great Dipper had made half the circuit of its orbit, and, borne upon its wings, Nick heard the thundering of the unshod hoofs of the pursuing mustangs; the foe was still on the trail and would pursue him to the bitter end.

Swerving now to the right, now to the left, the brave black steed avoided with an instinct that seemed almost human the various pitfalls in the shape of prairie-dog holes, that ever and anon obstructed her course, while the small owls which inhabit these domiciles in common with their diggers and the rattlesnake, flapped their wings in the young trapper's face as he sped over the plain, and seemed almost like ghostly visitants of the night.

The way now led over more broken ground and here the gallant animal that had saved Nick's life was forced to relax her speed and pick her way more cautiously as the night unfolded the earth still more closely in its shadowy pinions, for a false step or an untrue hoof would result in serious injury either to horse or rider.

The wind blew steadily; the coyotes shrieked out their almost human laughter; the sound of the pursuing hoofs grew fainter and fainter until it was lost altogether in the distance; the night grew darker and darker as the long grasses waved a mystic welcome to horse and rider as they swept by, until, at length worn out by loss of blood and nervous tension, the young trapper lost consciousness, and clutching at the mane of his faithful steed, fell heavily to the earth and there, seemingly deserted by God and man, lay prone and senseless, while his tired horse stood, with drooping head, close by, and waited for some word of command from its master, lifeless at her feet.

"Scouts report Indian signs in the neighbor-

hood, sir," said Sergeant Watson to the lieutenant commanding a detachment of the —th cavalry, which was out on a scout from Fort Douglas. "What are your orders for the day?"

"Detail a squad of not less than ten men to proceed north, at once, sergeant, and reconnoiter in the vicinity of the Forks. Let the rest of the company remain as at present and await their return. From what I can learn the Indians are present in force, and we must return to the fort for reinforcements."

The day broke quietly, and the first rays of the rising sun, striking full in Nick's face, roused him from the deathlike sleep into which he had fallen, and raising himself on one elbow he glanced around and endeavored to collect his scattered senses.

Like a flash the recollection of the preceding day came back to him, the occurrences of that awful time being the more vividly recalled to him by the sight of Black Bess grazing quietly near, she having rested and drank deep from a water-hole in the near vicinity.

Rising he staggered to the water, drank a deep draught, washed himself and bathed his wounds, and though stiff and sore, felt much relieved from the deathly faintness of the preceding night, and able at a moderate gait, to proceed onward toward his destination some ten miles distant.

Whistling to Bess he therefore mounted with difficulty and proceeded in the direction of the dug-out where he hoped that Old Si would still be awaiting him and where food and rest would give him new strength and vitality.

He was not, however, forgetful of the possibilities, and after riding a mile or more left his horse in a narrow ravine and cautiously mounted a solitary butte near by to scan the surrounding country and verify his fears, if such were to be the result, or abolish them altogether, hoping that the former was to be the case.

Alas! his hopes were born only to be frustrated, for not two miles distant proceeding at a leisurely pace, but following his trail with unswerving accuracy, came the band of Indian pursuers who had well-nigh ridden him to his death the night before.

They, doubtless thinking that in his exhausted condition he would be unable to continue his desperate ride, and believing that it was only a question of time when he would once more fall into their hands, a prey to weakness and to hunger, were leisurely following his trail, resting their ponies, and ready to give chase at a moment's notice to the bitter end.

Seeing that should he ride on a few moments would bring him in full sight of the band and realizing how weak and unprotected he was, Nick's courage, for a moment, nearly forsook him, but only for a moment, his indomitable nature asserting itself on the instant.

Descending hastily to the ravine where he had left his horse, and removing the lariat which still encircled her neck, and which, with much pleasure he recognized as being his own, he pointed south, slapped the mare on the haunches and, in a tone of voice which she well understood, said "Go!"

The intelligent creature regarded him wistfully for a moment or two, as though desirous of remaining and sharing his perils, and then with a shake of her head gave a gentle neigh and trotted off toward the south, not to stop until she had reached the haunted cabin, and leaving a broad and well-defined trail behind her.

Nick then remounted the butte and lying prone upon the turf, watched the advance of the savage band, little knowing that he was to be the sole spectator of a drama which only too often reddened the pages of history in the earlier days of frontier warfare.

The Indians rode slowly on, keeping their mustangs at a moderate trot, following the trail which lay clearly defined before them, and soon reached the spot over which Nick was lying, he not daring to project his head, but listening with all his ears to catch whatever might be said relating to him.

For a moment the band was at fault and one or two of the warriors dismounted to examine the trail, but soon discovering that the horse had proceeded in a southerly direction they remounted and were about to follow, when a loud "Ugh!" from one of their number caused them to halt.

Nick's heart, for a moment stood still. He thought he was discovered and gave himself up for lost.

But it was not his presence that had attracted the attention of the savages, for they hastily withdrew into the shelter of the ravine that cut into the valley below the butte on which Nick lay hid, dismounted and hopped their ponies carefully.

At a rough estimate Nick judged that there must be in the neighborhood of a hundred of them, and he was nearly tempted by his curiosity to look over the edge of the butte, even at the risk of discovery, to try and learn what had distracted the attention of the savages from the trail which they had been following so eagerly, but he dared not.

High up as he was, however, he commanded an extensive view of the plain surrounding him, and without rising to his feet could see for a long distance in all directions, and soon the mystery was solved, for, riding carelessly along up the valley, came a little band of soldiers, their arms and accouterments glistening in the sun, while they chatted and laughed with each other, utterly oblivious of any impending danger.

Ned would have given much to have been able to warn them, but he was powerless, for the slightest move on his part would only serve to betray him, without in any way aiding those whom he desired to warn, so that he was compelled to lie dormant, while the soldiers rode straight on into the jaws of death.

The savages, having disposed of their horses, and having left a few of their number to keep guard over them, to prevent their straying into the valley and thus betraying them, slipped out into the valley like so many shadows, and entered the tall grass, which completely concealed them.

In single file they marched, or rather crept along, until the foremost one reached a point a hundred yards or so from the place of depart-

ure, and here they halted, the line thus extending along the path which the soldiers must follow, and being only a few yards from it.

All unsuspecting, the squad, under command of the sergeant who had reported the presence of Indians to his lieutenant, rode along, thinking that the alarm must have been false, and that there were no Indians in the country except those which existed in the imagination, when suddenly one of the foremost horses stopped short, throwing up his head and snorting with affright at some unknown danger.

The soldiers halted and threw their guns to a ready, but it was too late.

With a yell that was calculated to chill the blood in the stoutest heart, the horde of savages arose and poured such a flight of arrows into the little band of gray-coats as nearly darkened the sun, the two ends of the dusky line closing in to the bank and forming a crescent which completely hemmed in the soldiers.

The first flight of arrows had killed four of the men outright, and grievously wounded the others; but the survivors, back to back, and hugging the bank, fought with the desperation of a forlorn hope, more than one of the Indians falling beneath their shots, while several, with more courage than discretion, who had advanced within reach of the heavy sabers, lay biting the dust, cleft with clean blows from crown to chin.

They fought more like gods than men, but skill and courage could avail nothing against such numbers, and, one by one, they dropped from their saddles, and fell dying or dead to the ground, until of the little band which had ridden so carelessly and so gayly into the valley, but one was left, and he the leader.

He still fought on with the desperation of despair, and at last, seeing that the last of his comrades had fallen, he wheeled his horse, charged where the savages were gathered the thickest, and describing a terrible *moulinet* with his sword, hewed and cut and slashed his way through the crowd, and sped away over the plain, followed by a thousand arrows, none of which, however, struck a vital part, he seeming to bear a charmed life.

Nick, who had been a breathless onlooker during the entire combat, the savages being too intent upon their bloody work to notice him, drew a long breath as he noticed the successful charge of the sergeant and its result, but the next moment a cry rose to his lips, which he barely suppressed in time to avoid betraying himself.

The horse ridden by the soldier, a magnificent bay charger, was evidently not prairie wise, for he had not run a hundred yards before he put his fore-foot in a burrow of some sort, and toppled over, throwing his rider, half-stunned, to the ground, and turning nearly a complete somersault.

In a moment the savage horde was upon him, but before they reached him he was on his feet and stood at bay, his terrible saber in his terrible right hand, his eyes flashing defiance, and his teeth set in grim determination.

The savage respects courage, and the Indians gazed at him in admiration, but only for a moment, and then they rushed upon him, the fore-

most paying for their temerity by falling to the ground with either a severe thrust or cut on some portion of their bodies, while the soldier stood his ground like a rock.

His revolver was empty, and he had nothing but his sword to depend on, and right bravely did he wage the fight until an act of cowardice and treachery ended the combat and his life together.

The voice of the chief was heard, loud above the noise of the fray, and falling back in obedience to his words, the warriors in front of the soldier gave way, until an open space was left, behind which stood the chief, with arrow fitted to his bow, which he raised and aimed at the breast of the soldier.

The latter saw the action, and knew that his hour had come, but regarded the chief with a cruel smile of sarcasm, implying that a hand-to-hand fight would give him victory, and that the chief knowing this, had to resort to assassination to win the battle.

So for a moment they stood, glaring at each other, the chief, however, being unable to keep his eye fixed in that of the other, for the sneering gaze was too much even for his savage stolidness, and then the bow-string twanged, the arrow flew straight to its mark, and the brave soldier fell dead to the ground; a hero he lived, a hero he had fought, and a hero he had died.

A yell arose from the throng at the death of their last foe on the field, and then the work of mutilation commenced, scenes ensuing that made Nick sick at heart, and caused his blood to boil as he witnessed the indignities to which the dead bodies were subjected.

The bodies of the nine soldiers were hewed and hacked, and cut and mutilated in every conceivable manner, so that at last they lay, scalped and completely unrecognizable; but the body and scalp of the sergeant were left untouched, for his brave defense had won the admiration of the Indians, and they respected his body dead as much as they had wondered at his courage living.

The work of mutilation was finished; quiet settled down over the scene of the late carnage; the savages, satiated for the nonce with blood, mounted their horses and once more picked up Nick's trail, rode rapidly south to make up for the time lost in the massacre, and left Nick alone with the dead.

The young trapper, as soon as they were at a safe distance, descended the sides of the butte and stood, looking around in horror at the bodies scattered around, the only living thing in sight.

CHAPTER XII.

BESIEGED BY FIRE.

FOR a few moments Nick stood alone on the plain, overcome with the horror of his surroundings. Ordinarily he would not have been thus affected, but in his present weak state his nerves were all unstrung and he was not himself at all.

As the sun rose higher and smote him with increasing fierceness, he realized that he was

naked to the waist, for so great had been the strain upon his system during the past forty-eight hours that he was entirely unconscious of his physical condition, and thought only of the predicament he was in.

With a feeling as if he were robbing the dead he approached the body of the sergeant as it lay where he had fallen, and was about to remove the loose jacket he had worn, when the sound of galloping hoofs startled him and he rose hurriedly and looked around, and saw that a riderless horse was coming toward him at a rapid rate of speed, stopping now and then to throw his head high in the air as he looked around and to utter a shrill neigh.

It was the horse the sergeant had ridden, which had recovered from its fall and was now galloping about, looking for its companions, all of which had been driven off by the Indians, some of whom had mounted them in preference to their own steeds.

The horse came up to within a few feet of Nick and then stopped, snuffing the air suspiciously at the sight of a stranger and was evidently about to seek in another direction when Nick's lariat, skillfully tossed over his head brought him to a standstill.

Nick held him fast, and after a few plunges in a vain endeavor to escape, he became quiet, when his captor approached and examined the saddle, where he was rejoiced to find a buckskin shirt tied to the cantle by the thongs usually placed there, and a small canteen containing brandy, a cup of which did him an immense amount of good.

Throwing the bridle-rein of the horse over his arm, after donning the shirt which he had found, Nick, preparatory to taking up his journey toward the dug-out, began a survey of the field, and was surprised to find, lying in the tall grass, the dead body of an Indian, who had been overlooked by his comrades in the hurry of departure, and lying by his side the rifle which the young trapper had been armed with when captured, while in a pouch hung over his shoulder was a quantity of jerked beef.

After a hearty meal, Nick mounted his horse, and with a sigh of regret that his weakness and the want of proper appliances would not allow of his administering the rites of sepulture to the dead soldiers, the sergeant of whom he recognized as having met at the fort, he rode slowly down the valley in the direction of the dug-out, keeping a sharp outlook lest he might fall in with a straggler from the band of Indians who had preceded him down the valley.

Nothing of note occurred during the first hour of his ride, and the deathlike stillness that brooded over the valley was unbroken by a single sound, save the beating of his horse's hoofs upon the green sward as he moved on at a swinging trot.

Perhaps half of the distance to the dug-out had been traversed, and Nick's spirits were beginning to rise as he approached his destination, when his attention was attracted by a small prairie owl, which suddenly arose from the tall grass, a little distance ahead of him, and off to the left.

On the plains the slightest circumstance, trivial as it may appear to one not versed in the

ways of the prairie, is of greater or less importance, and from every effect some cause may be traced, and so it was in the present instance. So, hurriedly stopping his horse, Nick leaned forward in his saddle, and listened eagerly for some sign, while his eyes glanced hither and thither in anxious quest of the suspicious object which his mind had already conjured up.

It was not long until his ear caught a faint rustling sound, and his quick eye detected the slight waving of the grass on the banks of the stream a hundred yards to the left and twice that distance in front of him, and he cocked his rifle, and sat with finger on trigger awaiting a better view of the moving object.

Could it be Old Si, working slowly up-stream, or was it an Indian straggler who was endeavoring to secure a beaver from the dam which those industrious creatures had built just below that spot? Nick was in doubt, or he would have sent a bullet crashing into the grass where he saw the movement, and solved the mystery then and there.

A moment more and all doubt was at rest, for overtopping the grass by a few inches, he saw the tips of the eagle-plume head-dress worn by bucks when in full war-dress, and, a little later, the Indian rose to full height, exposing his head and shoulders above the herbage, as he looked over toward the water in his endeavor to catch sight of a beaver and to shoot it that he might make a juicy meal out of its tail.

Nick's rifle leaped to his shoulder, and the sight fell on the excellent mark afforded by the broad, bare shoulders of the Indian, yet the trigger was not pulled. If there were any others of the band lurking in the vicinity, the report would surely attract their attention and bring them down upon him instantly; the lasso was quieter and just as effective, so, slinging his rifle under his left leg, Nick uncoiled his lariat and rode down at full speed upon the unsuspecting savage.

The Indian remained looking for his prey for a moment, and then, as he heard the crashing of the horse through the grass, turned, saw Nick advancing at full speed, drew his arrow to the head, and hastily let fly a chance shot which flew wide of the mark, and then striking south, he ran, as only an Indian can run, at a long, swinging lope, in the direction of the dug-out, Nick following at full gallop, with lasso circling in the air.

The Indian had evidently recognized his pursuer and the terrible instrument he wielded, for instead of running in a straight line he followed a zigzag course, which offered anything but a fair mark to the lasso.

Again and again Nick was about to launch his noose, but withheld his hand as the runner doubled and turned and twisted from left to right and from right to left, making it impossible to throw with accuracy.

And so the chase continued, Nick making one or two vain endeavors to catch the wily savage, but without success, until at length the dug-out came in sight a half-mile away, while a mile below it Nick saw the entire band of Indians which had pursued him the night before, and who, having followed his trail to the ravine where was situated the haunted cabin, and not daring

to go further on account of their superstition, were sullenly retracing their steps up the valley.

All reasons for concealment were now done away with, so Nick, coiling up his lariat, hung it to the horn of the saddle, unslung his rifle, took a quick aim at the fleeing savage and fired.

As when running swiftly a shot rabbit turns innumerable somersets, so it was with the Indian, who, running at full speed as he was, and shot through the heart, fell head over heels and was trampled under the feet of Nick's horse before he lay quiet, so close to him had been the young trapper at that moment of the chase.

Not pausing for a moment, Neck-Tie swept on until he arrived below the dug-out where Old Si, whose notice had been attracted by the shot, stood waiting, reined in his horse just beneath the door, threw up his rifle, and then standing on the saddle and reaching out his hands to Si, was drawn inside the dug-out, just as the band of Indians came thundering up and sent a shower of arrows after him, which rattled harmlessly against the buffalo-hide curtain that served as a door.

A hearty grasp of the hand was the only greeting between the friends, and not a word was interchanged, for it was no time for sentimentalities, the presence of the savages forbidding anything of that kind, and each man leaped to his loop-hole and the two rifles spoke together, while two riderless horses galloping wildly about showed how true had been their aim.

The warning was sufficient for the Indians, and they quickly scattered to the right and left out of range of the deadly weapons of the two hunters, who having, for the time being at least, repulsed their enemies, had time for a little conversation, during which Nick related his adventures to Old Si, and the latter related the fact of his having found the piece of deer-hide on which Nick had written his message.

The old hunter, well versed in a rude sort of surgery, washed and greased Nick's wounds, the only really serious one being the cut in the shoulder inflicted by the old squaw, it having grown sore and inflamed, rendering the arm stiff and nearly useless, but promising to heal up in a day or so and leave the patient as well as ever.

After his wounds had been thoroughly attended to, Nick, at the old trapper's earnest solicitation, laid down to take some much-needed rest, and when he awoke it was long after dark, and the stars were shining brightly in the heavens, while the dim figure of Old Si was barely discernible as he stood like a statue at one of the loop-holes keeping a vigilant watch.

Ned chided him for not having awakened him sooner, but was assured that there had been no need, as there had not been the slightest suspicious sign which would necessitate his presence, or he would have been called.

Ned then took up his watch, while Si rested, and as he stood at the loop-hole his attention was attracted by a curious rustling sound just underneath the dug-out, the meaning of which he could not fathom, but which continued at intervals for half an hour or more, when he, fully persuaded that something was wrong, went to

the door, and cautiously swinging the curtain out a few inches, looked down below.

The night was a very dark one, the only light being from the stars, and the shadow from the bluff made everything on the ground close to it doubly indistinct, yet he could perceive that something was going on below, yet just what it was he was unable to discover.

He was just about to arouse Old Si, when a bright light shot upright underneath him, and a volume of choking smoke rolled up into his face, for the moment nearly strangling him, and bringing on such a fit of coughing that the noise aroused the old trapper in an instant, and he anxiously inquired what was the matter.

Nick had let the buffalo-hide curtain fall instantly, but the short time it had been open had sufficed to admit a quantity of smoke, which half-filled the dug-out, and rendered the matter of breathing one of some difficulty, and as the fire burned more fiercely the smoke became denser and denser, until the inmates of the miniature fortress were in imminent danger of suffocation.

The Indians had piled a huge quantity of dry grass up against the bank, directly underneath the dug-out, and, after dampening it slightly, had ignited it, hoping to either drive the occupants out, or smother them like rats in a hole, and it seemed at first as if the trick were going to have either one result or the other.

But the trappers were quick to act, and hastily stuffing pieces of furs into the loop-holes, they drew the hide-door close in against the dirt sides and lintel, secured it with a thong, and then, enveloping their heads in blankets, leaving only a breathing-place, took up their position at the lookout holes which ran obliquely north and south, and of the existence of which the Indians were not aware, and thus were enabled to breathe with comparative comfort.

The fire was kept up for several hours, and the heat in the dug-out became almost unbearable, while the hide that hung in the doorway was shriveled and parched and shrunken so that it gave free ingress to the heat and smoke, although it still hung in its place and kept out the flames.

Finally the Indians desisted from adding further fuel to the fire, believing, no doubt, that the trappers were either suffocated or scorched to death, and as a slight breeze sprung up with the morning sun, the interior soon cooled, and the smoke made its egress through the openings left when the furs were removed from the loop-holes.

This was the most severe attack that the dug-out had yet sustained, and it was doubtful if it could resist another one like it; for should the door give way completely there would be nothing to keep out the smoke and flame, and the place would be no longer habitable.

The question was a serious one, and Nick and Old Si consulted anxiously and in low tones what had best be done under the circumstances. The valley was teeming with Indians, and any move made in daylight meant certain death, while even if they awaited the approach of night, they were liable at any moment to stumble over some prowling red-skin,

Besides, with nightfall would not the Indians recommence their aggressive policy of the preceding night, and in that case would not the firelight preclude all possibility of escape?"

All of these questions were balanced and weighed by the trappers while they ate their morning meal and washed it down with hasty gulps of smoky water.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHITE VS. INDIAN CUNNING.

THE trappers preserved a perfect silence during the day, hoping that the Indians might be induced to venture into sight, and that they might be able to get in a telling shot or two, but the red-skins were cautious and kept well under cover, although through the lookout holes they could be seen gathering huge quantities of dried grass from along the banks of the stream, and carrying it to a point near the dug-out for use that night.

All of this the two besieged were powerless to prevent, and they watched the preparations with anxious forebodings as to what the night would bring forth, for think as they would, not a single chance of escape offered itself, and it seemed as if they must either be suffocated where they were, or else, leaping through the flames, die on the knives or from the piercing arrows of their enemies.

Again and again they consulted, but both were compelled to acknowledge that they were at their wits' ends, and that unless something unforeseen happened, their deaths were only a question of a few hours.

They agreed to one thing, however, and that was that they would not die like rats in a hole, but if the worst came to the worst, would together leap among their enemies, and, fighting side by side, sell their lives as dearly as they could, vowing that their road to the other world should be marked by a trail of blood which would bring mourning to many an Indian wigwam.

The day wore on, and the inmates of the dug-out sat listlessly about or strolled to the loop-holes to see if any opportunity for a chance shot offered, both being too nervous to sleep and only wishing that the time for action would arrive, as this waiting seemed interminable.

Toward four o'clock, Si was munching a piece of jerked beef and pretending that he was enjoying it, while Ned was lying on a buffalo-robe in the corner, smoking and looking up at the ceiling, knitting his brows and thinking hard enough to give him the headache. Heretofore his had been the guiding mind in all their schemes and projects, and of all the difficulties they had encountered, this was the first he had found insurmountable.

He thought of the fort, of his friends there, his sister, of her whom he one day— Ha! as though he had received an electric shock, he bounded to his feet, and slapping the old man on the shoulder, executed a silent war-dance, and only wished he could give vent to his feelings in a whoop of sheer delight. He had solved the difficulty.

As soon as Old Si could dislodge from his windpipe the piece of jerked meat which had been forced there by the tremendous slap he had received, he gazed at Nick in open-mouthed astonishment, and then resumed his former occupation, remarking in an undertone: "Crazy, by gum!"

Nick paid no attention to the sarcastic utterance of the old man, but, moving the water-cask to the center of the dug-out, laid a short piece of board across it, and, mounting thereon, began removing the planks that formed the ceiling, proceeding cautiously, and with as little noise as possible, until he had detached a half-dozen of the boards in the middle, leaving bare the earth above.

Si began to grow interested but said nothing, neither was a word vouchsafed him by the young trapper, who proceeded quietly yet expeditiously with his work.

Having laid bare a sufficient space of the ceiling, he descended from his perch, and going to one corner of the dug-out, began to turn over and remove a miscellaneous pile of skins that was thrown helter-skelter to one side, and soon unearthed the tools that had been used in completing the structure, consisting of a couple of hatchets, a pick-ax, spade and one or two other common tools.

Armed with one of the hatchets, he returned to the board on the barrel and with the sharp edge began cutting into the dirt overhead, bringing the earth down in clods and raising a tremendous cloud of dust which set them both to sneezing, while Si, still preserving an unbroken silence, grasped his rifle and alternated between the loop and observation holes, redoubling his vigilance as his companion toiled away at the soil overhead.

The work was slow and tedious, the soil being hard and the dust necessitating frequent stoppages, and in a half-hour Nick was compelled to descend and give his place to Old Si, having in the mean time, excavated a hole to a considerable depth in the ceiling of the apartment, if such it may be called.

Nick's plan was to dig a way out overhead inasmuch as it seemed impossible to escape by the natural exit, and his partner readily saw that this was the only means left them to avoid the ordeal of fire being prepared for them as the sun went down.

Alternating with each other they succeeded beyond their most sanguine expectations, and as dusk came on, a blow of the hatchet struck more than usually hard by Nick, was followed, as he withdrew the blade, by a speck of light and he knew that the surface was reached and that it was only a matter of a few minutes to open a passage sufficiently large to enable them to crawl through, and so desisted until darkness should settle down and obscure their movements.

The only fear was that the Indians might have posted guards on the plain above, but this they hardly thought probable, as the savage mind can contain but one thought at a time and they were fully occupied with their bonfire.

As the twilight disappeared, the rustling of the dry grass was plainly audible as the In-

dians, hugging the cliff, placed the bundles under the door, and the trappers quickly enlarged the opening to a sufficient size, and just as the torch was applied, crawled through, up out of the stifling atmosphere of the dug-out onto the prairie above and into the pure air of heaven, chuckling to themselves and laughing in their sleeves at the manner in which they had outwitted their foes.

Nick had so gauged the distance of the opening from the front of the dug-out that they reached the plain just behind the water-mark, and there lying flat they looked anxiously around for any one who might be in sight, but nothing was visible and they were about to rise and move on when Nick's hand was laid on Old Si's shoulder and he was pulled violently back to the ground without speaking a word.

Laying his finger on his lips, Nick motioned to his comrade to listen, when the latter became aware of a deep, stertorous breathing somewhere in the vicinity, finally locating it on the side of the water-mark opposite to the one by which they were lying.

Leaving his partner lying there perplexed and wondering what all this might mean, Nick sinking flat on his stomach and worming his way over the grass like a snake, stole around the pile of stones, and projecting his head cautiously around, solved the mystery of the snoring in a twinkling, for doubled up on the turf lay an Indian in the soundest slumber, an odor of sutler whisky and a canteen lying by his side, that had been captured from the soldiers the day before, explaining the reason of his non-watchfulness.

Nick could scarce refrain from laughter at this example of the influences of civilization upon the noble red-man, but returned to Old Si and explained matters to him entirely to his satisfaction.

The sentry had proven remiss, and, having found the canteen full of fire-water, had taken advantage of the first time he was alone to drink up the entire contents, and being totally unused to the fluid, had succumbed to it at once, leaving his post unguarded, and the trappers free to escape under his very nose.

As the Indians had desired to give them a baptism of fire, so they determined that one at least of the savages should undergo the same ordeal, and dropping back into the dug-out, now nearly full of smoke, Nick secured, with some difficulty, a tanned deerskin, which was hung up at one side to be cut up and used as needed, for bridle-reins, etc.

Returning to the surface, he quickly cut the skin into several strips, one being about four inches wide and tapering toward the ends, to be used as a gag, and then he and Old Si walked boldly around the pile of stones, clapped the gag over the sleeper's mouth, and tied the ends firmly behind his head, bound his hands and feet firmly with the buckskin thongs, little caring whether or no they cut into the flesh, and then rolled him like a log of wood toward the edge of the bluff, where the flames from the tremendous pile of hay beneath were leaping high overhead.

The Indian remained all this time totally unconscious, and did not make the slightest resis-

tance, so completely was he under the influence of the fiery liquor that he had poured down his throat like water.

Returning and getting their guns, the two trappers came back to the Indian, rolled him a little nearer the edge, and then, with a simultaneous push, sent him headlong into the fiery gulf beneath. A tremendous cloud of sparks sprung into the air as the body struck the incandescent mass beneath, and a mighty shout arose from the Indians, for they thought that one of the trappers must have chosen instant death to slow suffocation, and leaped into the sea of flame in order to end his misery at once.

The whole band, which up till now had been hidden in the darkness beyond, rushed forward within the circle of light cast by the fire, and then the two rifles cracked, and, as two of their comrades pitched headlong to the ground, the rest of the savages saw, looming up awful and mysterious in the smoke and flame—as it appeared to their superstitious eyes—the gigantic forms of the two trappers who, seen indistinctly as they were, seemed very giants to the trembling red-men, and the whole number took to their heels in a regular stampede; and, tumbling over one another and into numerous holes and wallows, did not stop until miles lay between them and the scene of the almost incredible visions they had seen.

Nick and Old Si remained masters of the field and leisurely walked south to where the horses were stabled, Nick finding Black Bess munching her hay as unconcerned as if she had never left her stall.

The horses were led out, watered, groomed and saddled, and the trappers mounted and started for Fort Douglas, believing that for the present their troubles were over and that they would have a pleasant and prosperous trip into the boundaries of civilization.

The steeds were fresh and willing, the night was cool and clear and as they swept over the prairie they conversed freely of the dangers they had braved and passed until at length conversation ceased and they rode on in silence, side by side, each one busy with his own thoughts.

Nick's anticipations for the future were of the brightest, for did not pretty little Nellie Brooks always treat him with marked preference when he was at the fort, much to the disgust of the young officers who swarmed about her, like moths around the candle's flame? And was she not always glad to see him and, apparently, loth to let him go?

Nick's heart was very soft and pretty Nellie had crept in there and so safely ensconced herself therein, that he could not have dislodged her even had he wanted to; and you may rest assured that he had no idea or intention of doing anything so foolish as that.

He would not venture out on the plains any more, with his life in his hand, but would ask pretty Nellie to marry him, and if she said him yea, then there would be a happy wedding at the fort, and he would find a pleasant home whither he would bear his bride and turn his every energy toward making her happy!

And there would always be a room in the house and a seat at the table for Old Si, who

had so many times saved his life. Indeed, he should insist that Si should become one of the family, for he was like a father to him, and he never could be happy if they were definitely separated.

So they rode on, Nick's horizon being roseate with happy thoughts, and as, after traversing the distance which lay between them and the fort, they rode into the yard, being welcomed as if arisen from the dead, he spied the little maiden coming toward him, if he flew toward her, and, imagining his anticipations were realized, he clasped her in his arms and gave her a hearty kiss, who can blame him?

And as for her indignant—"Why, Mr. Parkhurst!" it was not as severe as it first seemed, for the poor fellow looked so pale, and was so weak from loss of blood, that no one could be harsh with him, and after escaping the Indians he was near being coddled to death by his sister and by Miss Nellie Brooks, who, the first time they were alone, promised to substitute Parkhurst for her own name, "R-e-a-l soon!"

CHAPTER XIV.

RETRIBUTION.

So Nick was soon to become a Benedict, and when the news spread about, many were the felicitations that poured in on the happy couple, Captain and Mrs. Brooks having accorded their most gracious assent to the marriage of the daughter with the general favorite, for on investigation his worldly goods were found to amount to a considerable sum, he having an interest in a herd of cattle in the eastern part of Texas.

On arriving at the fort, Nick had immediately presented himself at headquarters and related to the colonel in charge what he had seen from the butte that day, when the Sioux had massacred the soldiers and left none to tell the tale, so when, a few days afterward, the detachment returned to camp, the lieutenant in command was ordered under arrest to await court-martial for incompetency, and an expedition was organized against the Sioux village, where Nick had so narrowly escaped.

And now the trouble commenced, for Nick was the only person about the fort who knew the location of the village and was requested to lead the expedition, when Miss Nellie, putting her little foot down emphatically, declared that Mr. Parkhurst should *not* go and that was the end of it, so there now, but finally the matter was adjusted by her father, who represented to her that a soldier's daughter should not act thus and she was finally induced to listen to a little reason.

So one morning, at early dawn, a hundred as fine fellows as ever threw a leg across saddle rode away over the prairie.

The troupe followed the trail which Nick and Old Si had made in coming in and camped for the night well on their way to the dug-out, starting out early the next morning again and traveling all day at good rate of speed, reaching at night the ravine where was the haunted cabin, which was pointed out to the surgeon by

Nick, they both enjoying a hearty laugh over the recollection of poor old Tish-a-na-o.

Here a halt was called and the troop went into camp for the night, while Nick and Old Si scouted on toward the dug-out, returning with the intelligence that all was quiet and that there was not a sign of Indians in the valley or on the plain.

A quiet night followed and the next day all was soon arranged for the campaign, the soldiers following in single file after Nick and his partner, the old trapper, who rode far in advance and kept a sharp lookout ahead for any Indian scouts who might be straggling about.

Past the ruined dug-out they rode, the trappers stopping and gazing for a moment in sorrow at the ruin the fire had wrought, then on to the trail and down into the valley whence the scene of the massacre was soon reached, the cavalcade proceeding at a quick trot over the intervening distance.

Arrived at the scene of the fight a halt was made and such remnants as had been left by the coyotes and wolves, carefully and reverentially gathered up, and inhumed in one common grave, while a few well-spoken words by the surgeon constituted their funeral oration, and then the soldiers moved on to the ravine which had sheltered the Indian mustangs, and disappeared.

Nick's plan comprised a system of retribution, and although it seemed somewhat foolhardy, was acquiesced in by the officers of the regiment, who, dare-devil young fellows, were willing to add a little to the excitement of the day, although the danger was thereby doubled.

Leaving the remainder of the party safely hidden away within the ravine, with strict injunctions not to move from there for two days, and then to station themselves according to arrangement, Neck-Tie Nick, with a picked band of ten men, chosen on account of the superior speed of their horses, rode off in the direction of the Indian village, and steadily pursued the route until within a mile or two of it, without a solitary incident marking the monotony of the journey.

The fact that not an Indian was seen rather discouraged Nick and his companions, but they hoped that the tribe was only resting preparatory to some new deviltry, so, when within a short distance of the village, Nick, dismounting, stole forward on foot, and reaching the brow of the hill up which he had toiled so wearily in his race for life, was rejoiced to see the village still in its place, while the presence of numerous mustangs denoted that the warriors were not on the trail, but were resting at home.

Returning to his companions, Nick reported the success of his expedition, and the little band encamped for the night, a vigilant watch being kept through the night, but their rest being unbroken, so that men and horses were in excellent condition the next morning when day broke.

Just after they had finished their hasty meal, chance favored them exactly as Nick would have wished, for a solitary Indian came wandering toward them, on the lookout for such small game as he might pick up on the prairie, and Nick, bidding his comrades mount and be in

readiness, rode down upon the unsuspecting savage at full gallop.

The youth was for some moments unaware of his approach, and then hearing the thunder of his horse's hoofs against the green sward, turned, stood for a moment as if paralyzed, and then set off for dear life's sake in the direction of the village.

Nick toyed with him for a time as a cat does with a mouse, and then as the flying youth neared the brow of the hill which overlooked the Indian village, he gave free rein to his mare, and rode down on him, as though thrown from a catapult, while the trembling lad yelled with fear, thereby attracting the attention of nearly the entire band of Indians.

But this was his last cry on earth, for the noose of Nick's lariat choked off all further utterance, and, with a final gurgle in his throat, he fell to the ground exactly at the spot where Nick had made his desperate leap over the wall of human beings who compassed him about, and sought either his death or serious injury.

In an instant the village was in an uproar, and with cries and yells the warriors rushed to the herd, each one taking the pony which first came to hand, and goaded almost to madness by the sight of Nick, who, coolly dismounting, walked to the dead body, removed the lariat, and then, in the face of the assembled village, scalped the yet warm head of the strangled boy, returned to his horse, coiled up his lariat, mounted and rode off at a leisurely pace.

Not many moments elapsed, however, before he was compelled to quicken the gait of his horse, for the Indians were rapidly overhauling him, and by the time he rejoined his companions, his mare was stretching out at full gallop, and his comrades were compelled to use the spur freely to keep up with him.

Once fairly going, the grain-fed horses of the soldiers had no difficulty in outstripping the grass-fed mustangs of the Indians, and, at Ned's suggestion, they reined in their horses a little, so as to induce the savages to keep up the chase, for when the pursuers saw that the pursued no longer gained on them, they were filled with fresh hopes of overtaking them and rode steadily on.

And so went the chase until the little band of horsemen in front entered the valley, where for many days the bones of their comrades had lain, bleaching in the sun, and as they looked back and saw the band of savages still pursuing them, they drew rein still a little tighter, and allowed the distance which separated them to grow still a little less, until scarce a bow's shot divided the soldiers from the savages, and the latter were frantic in their efforts to urge their tired ponies to still greater efforts.

At length the leaders swept past the butte on which Nick had lain hidden during the hand-to-hand fight between the sergeant and his assailants, and instead of keeping straight on, they swerved to the left, made a semi-circle, and, as a line of fire broke seemingly from every blade of grass that lined the river, they rode into the Indian ranks, already decimated by the iron hail, and began sabering right and left, while the cordon of steel closed closer and closer around the doomed savages.

And now out of the ravine came thundering fifty more of the long-swords, as the Indians term the cavalymen, and attacked the savages on the flank, while from the top of the butte a half-dozen picked sharpshooters kept a sharp lookout for all who attempted to flee and picked them off at ease, Old Si, in particular, excelling at this sort of sport.

But few escaped and these were pursued far over the prairie by the swiftly mounted soldiers, who returned to camp, drunk with slaughter, and threw themselves on the ground and dropped off to sleep, too tired to eat.

There was wailing in the tepees of the Yanktonais Sioux when the story of the massacre was brought to the village by the few survivors who escaped to tell the woeful tale, and the ground was wet with blood in many a wigwam where wounds were self-inflicted as a sign of mourning, and to this day the fight on the Rickaree is chanted in mournful tune and rhythm, as the elders of the tribe try to instill into the bosoms of the young, the hatred that they have always felt for the whites.

The lesson was a salutary one and the power of the tribe was for a long time broken in that portion of the Union, the strategy displayed by Nick having been crowned with complete success and leading to one of the greatest victories ever achieved over the vindictive Sioux.

On the following morning the unpleasant task of burying the dead began, and it was found that ninety-seven of the Sioux had perished outright while nearly fifty warriors remained prisoners in the hands of the soldiers, and of the latter not one had been killed, and the wounds of those injured were trivial in the extreme.

The captured Indians were mounted on their mustangs and surrounded beyond possibility of escape by the soldiers, when the cavalcade took up its march toward the fort, passing down the valley in front of the dug-out which was a sight pitiful to see.

The leaping flames had completely destroyed the buffalo-hide door and the hole made by the trappers serving as a chimney, the fire had been drawn through the dug-out as through the

funnel of a furnace, the whole interior being completely gutted and destroyed and rendered entirely uninhabitable, many valuable furs having also been lost in the flames.

No halt was made, however, and the soldiers pushed on, reached the fort without misadventure and relating to their comrades the complete success of their expedition and awarding to Nick all praise for his strategy, while at dress-parade that evening he was called out, and publicly thanked for the services he had rendered the Government, and the command of the scouts attached to the garrison offered to him, which offer, Nick, seeing the future Mrs. Parkhurst shaking her head vigorously and holding up a warning finger, diplomatically declined.

He was offered his pick of the Indian herd, however, and nothing loth chose twenty of the best mustangs for use on his ranch, and one little black beauty for Nellie.

In a few days there was a wedding at the fort and the whole garrison celebrated Nick's hymeneals, there being nothing to fear from the Indians after the late salutary lesson, and discipline for that day being allowed to become lax.

The bride of course looked charming and the groom handsome and manly, while Old Si, togged out in his gala dress and swelling with joy and pride, was hardly recognizable; and as for "Old Tish," the aged victim of the doctor's practical joke, he fell early in the fray from the effects of sundry bottles of liquor surreptitiously obtained from the sutler, and was wheeled off in a barrow and incontinently dumped in a corner to sleep off the effects of his debauch.

So, happily married and doubly enjoying the quiet of his wedded life after the tumult of his bachelor days, Nick settled down at the fort, occupying a vacant cottage in the officers' quarters, and giving his whole time to raising cattle and filling Government beef contracts, while Old Si, his second father and his partner on the ranch, aided him with his advice and his occasional assistance and occupied a portion of Nick's house where he was a loved and honored guest.

THE END.

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